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FOR INDIAN SCHOOLS

STORIES FROM

EURIPEDES

ALCESTIS
AND THE
CYCLOPS

BY

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ALCESTIS

CHAPTER I

In ancient times, so the old legends ran, the immortal gods of Greece were pleased to walk about the earth and mingle with mortal men—sometimes for short visits only, sometimes for periods of months or even of years, during which they took active part in men's affairs, made friends and enemies among them, and often interfered to help or hinder them, whether in peace or war.

And indeed these old gods themselves, as the Greeks conceived them, were very like mortal men in nature, though they had very much more power to do harm or good. Like men, they quarrelled among themselves, had their ambitions and spites and rivalries, and were not always very willing to accept the rule of even the Father himself—Zeus, the All-Powerful, the Thunderer, the sire and chief of them all. But for all that, old Zeus maintained his sway over them; for he had quelled the Giants, the primitive sons of Earth, hurling upon them mountain after mountain till they were prisoned for ever underground; and thereafter the Giants had to toil for him, deep down in their hidden forges, forging him thunderbolts which were his terrible weapons, and with which he could utterly destroy his foes without moving from his throne.

The Gods, his own children, he could not destroy, for they were immortal. But he had power to humble and punish them when they crossed his will. And the tale of Alcestis, who was a mortal queen, has its beginnings in the wrath of Zeus against his beautiful son Apollo, the god of music, the sun, and archery.

Their quarrel arose in this way. In very early times, Apollo's mortal son Asclepius discovered the art of medicine; he was the first of doctors; and so clever was he that Zeus, jealous because Asclepius seemed to him to be challenging his power of life and death, hurled at him one of his dread thunderbolts, and slew him. Apollo's rage was terrible; he could do nothing against Zeus, of course; but he took vengeance on the Giant who had forged the thunderbolt, and killed him in turn.

Now this act was a sort of challenge to Father Zeus, a revolt against his power. And Zeus replied by forcing his rebellious son to go down on earth in human shape, to serve a mortal master as a slave for a year and a day. But Apollo was fortunate in the master assigned to him: perhaps more fortunate than he deserved, or than his father Zeus had intended. His master was a king—Admetus son of Pheres, who had his royal palace at Pherae and ruled over Thessaly. This was a country of rich plains and grass-lands, where men bred horses and raised flocks. Apollo became a shepherd to Admetus; and though of course Admetus did not know who his shepherd really was, he was a just man and good master, and treated his servants well. So that Apollo's time of slavery was much less unpleasant than it might have been under a less kind lord.

You may be sure Apollo was duly grateful for his good fortune. Slave though he was, he still had some of his godlike power allowed him; he used this, even during the time of his punishment, to bring Admetus good luck, so that his flocks and herds were prosperous and his fortunes increased; and later on, when the god's punishment was over, he still watched over the affairs of his old master with special care.

In one way, particularly, Apollo showed his gratitude for King Admetus' kindness. He managed to make a bargain with the Fates (who portioned out to every man his span of life, and were as powerful as even Zeus himself) that when the time should come for Admetus to die, he might postpone his death if he could find some other person willing to die instead. The bargain did not stipulate who the saviour was to be; the Fates demanded a death at a certain time, but they consented that the king should find a substitute, if he could. Such was the position of affairs, at the time when the story of Alcestis begins.

The King of Thessaly had now approached the end of the fixed span of life, which the Fates had allowed him. By this time, he knew all about the bargain which Apollo had made; the only question was, where should he find a person fond enough of him to die in his stead? He first tried his father Pheres, now a very old man.

"Thy lifetime must needs be short, in any case" he pointed out. "Thy work is done, and in a very few years thou wilt have to die, whether thou shalt like it or not. Wilt thou not take my place, since by

the special mercy of Apollo thou art allowed to do so?"

But the old man refused. "I am as fond of life as thou, old as I am" he said. "I will not die for thee."

Admetus begged him again. "Think, father! If the gods spare me now, I have still many years of useful work before me, guiding and judging my folk here in Pherae. What is the value of thy few remaining years—thou who art old, and canst no longer play any useful part in thy country's history?"

But his father declined to see it in that light. "I my be useless" he maintained, "but my life is my own. I enjoy living in this pleasant land as much as anyone. I do not want to leave it a day before I must, any more than thyself; and I will not die for thee."

Admetus then turned to his aged mother; but her reply was the same. "Life is sweet, even to the old. I will not die for thee."

Admetus was in despair. His people loved and honoured him, for he was a good and just king; but none of his many friends would go so far as to die for him; indeed, King Admetus can have hardly hoped that they would, when his own aged parents had refused. He asked the most loyal of them, hoping still; but they all returned the same answer. There was no remedy, it seemed; the privilege wrung by Apollo from the Fates was turning out to be useless, after all; no saviour could be found, and the great king of Thessaly must die, like anyone else.

CHAPTER II

Now at this point, perhaps, you will be apt to say: "Why should not Admetus die? What right had he to ask that anyone else should save him? Was it not cowardly and selfish of him to expect such a thing?"

It seems so, to us. Indeed, to modern readers King Admetus must appear a very poor sort of hero. But we must realise that the Greeks, for whom this story was acted on the stage, had clear and definite ideas of kingship which were quite different from our own. Euripides, the old Greek dramatist who wrote the play of "Alcestis", does not indeed present Admetus as the central figure of his piece (the lady Alcestis is the heroine, as we shall presently see); but, on the other hand, he evidently does not think that there is anything mean or cowardly in Admetus' point of view. Throughout the play, he has no word of blame for him; he seems to think it natural that Admetus should hope to find somebody to die for him; and so we may infer, that the Greek audiences thought so too. We shall be less surprised at this, if we consider the traditions and minds of the Greeks.

To the old Greeks, a king was a man apart: a man picked by the gods to fulfil a most sacred office. He was the father of his people, not only their governor; he was the counsellor and lawgiver, the supreme priest; he stood for justice and religion; his person was sacred; he was almost a god himself. And if a king were just and good, as Admetus was, his death was the worst disaster that could befall a country. So, to a Greek mind it seemed just and natural that the king's life should be safeguarded at all costs. Even to die for him was not too much to expect, of any lesser

man who truly loved his country. As soldiers, his subjects were expected to risk their lives in his battles. Why then should not some loyal subject sacrifice himself in a time of peace, if by such sacrifice (as in Admetus' case) the king's life could be saved?

Such was the old Greek point of view; and once we grasp this point of view, the Admetus-story becomes clearer. Here is a king—a sacred life to be preserved at all costs; here also, by the favour of a god, is a means whereby the king's life can be saved quite easily; the only question is, who shall be the saviour?

But though men's customs and traditions change, human nature does not; and it is easy enough for us to understand the king's despair of finding a substitute. To risk one's life in battle is one thing; one may survive even the fiercest battle, and come gloriously home. But for the man who undertook to save Admetus, death was utterly sure; he must go down into the dark (as the Greeks spoke of death) at once, without delay, and without any hope of escape. It is no wonder that the king of Thessaly besought his friends in vain.

It is at this point that the lady Alcestis first appears in the story. She was a foreign princess, young and nobly born, whom King Admetus had brought home as his bride. They were ideally happy together, and had two small children, a boy and a girl. Had King Admetus died, the lady Alcestis would reign on in Pherae as queen, and might indeed have married some neighbouring king and lived in greater splendour than ever. Yet, when she knew that it was in her power to save Admetus' life, she did not hesi-

tate. Since no one else in all the land came forward, she was prepared to make the great sacrifice.

She has announced her willingness, and with quiet courage is getting for death, when the story of the play begins. We see the outside of the royal palace at Pherae. It is deserted, silent; and we have an uncanny sense of the grim fate that broods over it, for all the calm beauty of the clear sunny day. Presently a figure appears—that of a beautiful young man, the god Apollo himself. He is no longer wearing shepherd's dress, for the time of his punishment is over; but he has come back, godlike now, for he has had news of the lady Alcestis' sacrifice, and has returned to see if there is anything he can do, even now, for his old master and friend.

"Once more, Admetus, I revisit thy house" he sighs. "For the fatal day has come. I had beguiled the Fates to spare thy life, if any saviour could be found. But there was none. Friends, father, mother—all of them had refused. Only Alcestis, in her greater love, has been willing to die for thee, and already her death is near."

Slowly, the god descends the steps of the palace. He can do nothing more, and must avoid the house now, lest he be polluted by the presence of death. But he has hardly gained the open street before a second figure comes into his view—a mysterious, shrouded figure, dressed all in black, who glides towards the palace gate—Orcus, the Messenger of Death, sent from the underworld at the appointed time, to conduct Alcestis thither. He knows his fellow-god at a glance, and comes forward angrily.

CHAPTER III

"Why art thou here, Apollo? Why dost thou haunt this house? Is it not enough, that thou hast tricked the Fates and snatched Admetus from them, though he was due to die? Thou dost wrong the gods of Hades by such an act. Now, it seems, thou comest bow-in-hand to guard Admetus' wife, the daughter of Pelias; though thou knowest well that she at any rate must pay the penalty which her husband, thanks to thee, has escaped!"

Apollo bowed his head. "Fear not" he sighed. "I recognise thy power, nor will I dispute thy claim."

"If that is so, what means the bow in thy hand?" demanded Orcus suspiciously.

"It is my custom ever to carry it."

"Aye, and unjustly to protect the house of Admetus—that is another custom of thine!" retorted Death's messenger.

But Apollo answered gently: "My old friend is in trouble. Shall I not mourn for him?"

Orcus, however, was by no means satisfied; he still suspected that Apollo longed to dispute his claim—which was perfectly true. "Wouldst thou defraud me of a second death?" he snarled.

Apollo might well have taken offence ere this. But Orcus was quite right; the sun-god still nursed some last faint hope of saving Alcestis, though he knew well enough how merciless were the gods of the underworld. So he answered, gently still: "I have not yet defrauded thee of even the first."

"What! When he still lives, and walks on the earth! Am I not robbed of him?"

"Thou art not robbed of a death. For my old friend is ransomed by the woman, for whom thou hast now come," Apollo reminded him.

"Aye, her at least I will have" retorted Orcus grimly. "I will lead her away with me to the underworld."

"And yet" pursued Apollo, "I could wish that thou mightest still let me persuade thee—"

"To seize Admetus himself, who is my lawful prey?" the dark god interrupted.

"No. But since thou must have a death, to let it be the death of an older mortal."

"Oh, I can understand thee well enough!" growled Orcus. "I know how thou favourest him, I know thy hopes!"

"May not Alcestis, then, be spared to old age?" the sun-god pleaded. "Thou wilt have her in the end all the same."

"I dare say. Yet promises must be kept, even to the God of the Dead" was the stubborn reply.

Apollo tried again. "Thou canst take but a single life, whether soon or late—"

"But when death takes the young, my glory is greater."

"If the queen dies in her old age, her rites will be more splendid. The presents and sacrifices to thyself will be more" Apollo tempted him.

But the dark god shook his head. "Thou art proposing a law, Apollo, which would favour the rich."

"In what way? I do not understand."

"Because the rich would use their wealth to buy old age for themselves."

"Thou wilt show no mercy, then?" Apollo pleaded desperately.

"Not I! Thou knowest my custom."

"Aye, and I know thee!" was the god's angry answer; for he now realised that nothing he could say would move Orcus from his resolve. "Thou art the enemy of mankind, and hated by the gods!"

But the other only laughed. "Thou hast gained much, to which thou hadst no right, Apollo. But thou canst not have everything."

Apollo pleaded no longer, for he now saw the uselessness of asking mercy from Death. Instead, he changed his tone; and in a threatening voice, announced a piece of news. "Thou hast not yet won thy victory, Orcus, merciless though thou art. For know, there is a hero on his way to this house—one who was sent by King Eurystheus into the frozen north, to capture the fierce horses of the King of Thrace and to bring them back with him. He is Admetus' friend. He will be welcomed here when he arrives. And he will rescue Alcestis from thee by force, strong as thou art! I should have thanked thee, if thou hadst granted my request. Now thou wilt have to grant it despite thyself; and far from thanking thee, I shall hate thee still!"

But Death's messenger seemed to be no more impressed by this threat, than by Apollo's first gentleness. "Say what thou wilt" he cried, "thou shalt get nothing from me! The woman shall come with me to the underworld; make no mistake about that!" And then he drew his terrible sword, with which he used to cut a lock of hair from his victims' heads, as a sign that they were the subjects of the King of

Hades. "Stand aside" he ordered, "that I may enter and make good my claim with this!"

And Apollo obeyed, perforce. For not even the gods themselves had power to resist the Dark King's might. Grieving, he watched the shrouded figure pass slowly up the steps and into Admetus' palace.

CHAPTER IV

Meanwhile, along the street that led towards the city of Pherae, slow footsteps were heard approaching. The old men of Admetus' capital, heavy-hearted at the sorrow of their dear lord, wound their way weeping towards the palace; even now, they hoped that some god might avert the need for Alcestis' sacrifice; but they feared the worst.

They did not see Apollo, as he passed them in the narrow way; for to their mortal eyes the god was invisible. And yet the thought of him was present in all hearts, as they prayed to him by his other name of Paean, which means the Saviour. They found the palace gates silent and desolate.

"No friend, to tell us news" groaned one. "Are we to mourn the queen as already dead? Or is she still alive—she whom we swear to be the noblest of her sex, so dearly has she loved her lord!"

Another interrupted him, listening towards the gates. "Do you hear any cry? The beating of hands in grief, or wailing for the dead?"

One tiptoed towards the threshold. "There is no one on duty here—"

And then their wailing prayer swelled out afresh. "Bright Paean, show thyself to us amid this awful gloom! Apollo, help us! Scatter the storm-clouds of our grief!"

"If she were dead" said one, "the house would not be so silent. Nor could her body have been borne away, unseen by us."

For a little while they stood listening. Then: "Would our king take so glorious a wife to her grave, without due pomp and honour?" someone asked.

They peered this way and that, seeking the well-known signs of a house of mourning. But they could see no vessels of water outside the gates, such as were used to wash the bodies of the dead: nor the shorn locks of hair which mourners were wont to place at the threshold: nor could they hear the wail of the female slaves. "Yet this is the fatal day, when she must leave the light of the sun" they said.

"Oh, speak not of it!" someone cried. "You are breaking my heart!"

"Aye! Honest hearts must needs break, when sorrow falls on the good!"

Then all together, in despair, the kindly subjects of Admetus bewailed their helplessness. "We pray in vain! If there were only some almighty god, to whom we could appeal! Some temple, to which we could make pilgrimage—across the sea, maybe, sailing to Lycia's sacred shores? Or to the thirsty deserts of wild Africa, where the god Ammon has his oracle in the empty sands? But what charm shall save her, what high power avails against the kingdom of Death? The ruthless Tyrant comes! We know no further altar to which we can turn!"

And then, remembering Apollo again, and his wise son Asclepius who had once raised the dead: "Oh, that the Healer were still living on earth! His mighty art alone could have saved her from Death. He could have brought her back to us, even from the underworld. But angry Zeus has slain him, hurling his thunderbolt against his breast. And who now shall help us? To every god, at every altar, Admetus has sacrificed—in vain. Naught is left but despair!"

As they lamented thus, the gates of the palace opened and a servant came out—one of the queen's own slaves, her face wet with tears. The men pressed round her eagerly.

"What news?" they cried. "You may well weep, if the evil has come on us! But tell us, is she still living, or is she dead?"

"Both living and dead" the woman told them sorrowfully.

"How can that be?"

"Even while I speak to you, she is sinking fast. Her last moments are at hand."

"Oh, unhappy king!" the men of Pherae groaned. "What a wife art thou losing! Is there no hope of saving her, then?"

"No hope at all. The fatal day has come, which no power can avert."

The men were silent for a moment, crushed by their grief. Then they began to ask the slave, if the arrangements for the funeral of her mistress were made; for the Greeks thought it of the greatest consequence that the dead should be fitly honoured. The woman replied that nothing would be left undone, which should proclaim how deeply the queen's sacri-

fice was reverenced. "Aye, let her be renowned in death" they sadly agreed. "There is no wife like her. The sun in all his journey across the world shall never see her equal!"

"No, indeed" the servant answered weeping. "What more could the noblest woman who ever lived have done? What greater proof of honouring her lord could she give, than to consent to die for him, of her own free will? So much, all Pherae knows. But you will praise her still more, when I have told you how my lady spent this last day of her life." And then the servant, who had attended her unhappy mistress on this fatal day, began to tell the citizens the tale of Alcestis' last hours. "My lady, when she knew that the time had come, first bathed her fair limbs in water from the running stream. Then, from her wardrobe of sweet-smelling cedar-wood, she took a splendid robe, the loveliest of all her dresses. Thus gorgeously adorned, she stood before the holy altar-flame and made her prayer to the gods: 'I go to the infernal shades. Yet ere I go, hear the last humble prayer that I shall make in this world. Protect the children whom I leave. Make my son happy, some day, with the wife whom he shall love; and let some princely husband seek my daughter's hand. Let them not, like their mother, sink to the grave untimely, but let them live long in their native land, to a blessed old age.' Then to each altar in the palace my lady went, to crown it with the garlands of sacrifice, and to make her prayers to each god. She neither wept nor sighed; nor had the coming of death yet changed the lovely hue of her cheeks. At last she came to her own bedchamber, and stood by the bed. And then

at last her tears began to fall, and she spoke thus: 'O bed, to which my lord brought me as a virgin bride— my lord for whom I die — O bed, farewell! I lay no blame upon my marriage; for it destroys me alone. Rather than prove unworthy of that marriage, rather than fail my lord, I am resolved to die. Maybe some other woman shall take my place; she can be no more pure than I, though perchance she may be more happy.' And then she flung herself upon the bed and kissed it, and wept. Presently, her storm of tears over, she left the bedchamber; but she returned to it ere long, again and again, and each time she flung herself in anguish upon the bed. Her children, joining in her tears, clung to her robes; she raised them one by one, knowing how soon she must be parted from them, and held them to her breast. Her slaves were weeping too, in pity for their dear mistress. Sadly they came to her, to make their last farewells; and she held out her hand to each, nor was there any one so mean but she spoke kindly to him, and let him speak to her in his turn."

"And King Admetus?" asked the citizens.

"Ah, he escapes indeed the death that he must have died Yet his escape is followed by such sorrow, as is likely to break his heart."

The old men shook their heads. "Well may he grieve" they sighed, "to lose so noble a wife!"

"Admetus holds her dear body in his arms" the servant resumed. "He weeps, and implores her now not to leave him desolate; but he implores in vain. It is too late; her doom is decreed. Already she wastes and fades with the approach of death. Drooping, she lies there weakly in his arms; yet longs to

behold once more the light of the sun, ere her last moment comes and she may see his golden orb no longer. But I will go and tell the king and queen you are here. It is not every citizen that bears to his lords such love, that he is eager to stand by them when hard times come. But you have always proved yourselves loyal friends to Admetus' house."

The slave prepared to turn back into the palace; and once more the old men of Pherae broke out into tearful prayers. "O king of gods, is there no help for us in these sorrows? No shelter from the storm of fate that is breaking over our lord? Hast thou allowed no remedy? Or must we shear our locks in grief, and go robed in the sable dress of mourning?"

"We must mourn indeed" the servant sadly agreed. "Yet let us try the gods once more, for great is their power to save, and they may still have pity." So saying she raised her voice again in prayer, leading the rest in a last passionate appeal to Apollo the Saviour. "O Paean! O King! Vouchsafe some remedy for the sorrows of Admetus. Save him, O save him now! As thou didst rescue him from death before, help him again! Beat back the murderous haste of the King of Darkness?"

And the old men joined in, their loyal hearts filled with pity for Admetus' grief: "Alas, alas! Thou son of Pheres, how wilt thou endure to go on living, when Death has robbed thee of such a wife? Will not despair unsheath thy sword, and drive thee to take thy life? Will not thy sorrow urge thee to some dread act of violence against thyself? This day shalt thou see thy dear wife dead— thy best beloved, thy

most cherished possession...... But see, they are carrying her forth!"

The citizens broke off, as the great doors of Admetus' palace were slowly opened and a number of servants appeared. "Groan, land of Pheres! Raise the voice of mourning!" the old men cried. "For now the best of women wastes with sickness, and droops to the earth, already sinking towards the hateful land of Pluto, god of the underworld. Never again will I believe that marriage brings more joy than unhappiness! Oft have I noted this, of old; but never more than now, when I see how my king is stricken — my king, bereft of the sweet virtuous wife who was his, and doomed to pass the rest of life alone, without joy!"

CHAPTER V

By this time the palace doors were wide, and the sad procession issued at the head of the stairs. Four slaves, with bowed heads, carried out the couch on which the lady Alcestis lay; King Admetus followed them, leading his two small children by the hand. The dying woman raised her eyes; and for all her grief, a faint smile crossed her lovely face at the beauty of the scene before her—the fair plain of Thessaly, spreading for mile upon mile in the summer sunlight. For a few moments she gazed at it silently; then, in low tones, she spoke:

"The sun, and the fair light of day! The ever-moving clouds, that sail across the heavens!"

For of all things that the Greeks loved, they loved the sunlight most. They were a people who

lived much in the open air; and their chief dread of death was that it meant the loss of the sun. They believed that the spirits of the dead went down to the underworld—to a vast region which they called Hades, as wide as the world, and deep down beneath its surface. There, they believed, the souls of all who died stayed waiting, in an eternal twilight where the sun never came, till a thousand years had passed; then they were bathed in a certain stream called Lethe, the River of Forgetfulness, which took from them all memory of the life they had lived on earth; and then they returned to earth again, newborn in the bodies of fresh children, for another span of life. But the long thousand years could not be lessened by any prayer or sacrifice; so, to a dying Greek, his next life on earth was too far off to bring him much thought of comfort.

Admetus found none, in this hour of his sorrow. Bitterly weeping, he leaned down to his dying queen. "The sun now sees us, wretchedest of all the children of men! Yet we have done no crime against the gods, that thou shouldst have to die."

But Alcestis still gazed out across the roofs of the city, towards the Thessalian plain. And her mind turned towards Iolcos, far away, whence she had come to this fair city of Pherae as Admetus' bride, in days gone by. "Iolcos, my father's home!" she sighed.

"O thou poor suffering one" Admetus wept. "Raise thyself! Do not leave me! Pray to the mighty gods to take pity on thee."

"Charon calls me" her lips murmured faintly. "I see his ferry-boat on the river's brink. The pole

is in his hand, and he calls to me: 'Make haste, make haste! I am waiting. Why dost thou delay?" For the Greeks believed, that when the spirits of the dead had passed beneath the world, they were met by the Ferryman of Death, old Charon, who took them across the river Styx to the realm of Pluto. "He is impatient, he bids me make haste" Alcestis sighed.

And Admetus broke out again: "O unhappy queen, how sad a voyage is this! How wretched is our fate!"

The woman's eyes were full of fear, as she gazed trembling at some vision which she seemed to see. "He drags me, he drags me towards the gates that close on the dead! King Pluto! Canst thou not see him? Canst thou not see him frowning grimly at us, with his gloomy eyes? Let me go, Pluto! What dost thou want with me? Ah, wretched, wretched me, what a dread journey must I go—down, down!"

"Most wretched to all who love thee" Admetus sobbed. "But most of all to me, and thy children who share my sorrow!" No doubt the King of Pherae now repented his bargain. He would have saved Alcestis if he could, even by dying himself. But he was not the first to find that those who bargain with the gods must stand by the bargain, and may not change their minds. Apollo had saved him—at a price. It was too late to draw back now; the price must be paid.

Alcestis sank back upon the couch, and her eyes closed. "Hold me up no longer" she sighed wearily. "Here let me lie, for my strength is ebbing away. I can no longer sit upright. Death stands close by me, and dark night is creeping over my eyes." But she saw

dimly, her two children watching piteously from the foot of the bed, and stretched out her arms to them. "Children, dear children! Soon your mother must go. Farewell! May you live on and rejoice in the golden light of the sun, more happy than I!"

Her farewell words wrung from Admetus a most terrible cry. "Ah, unhappy words, more painful than any death to me! By the gods I beseech thee not to leave me alone! I have no life without thee. In thee alone I exist—in thy love, in thy dear fellowship—" And of all his sorrowing friends, there was not one who had the heart to remind the king that his fate had been brought on him by himself.

Alcestis turned to him, though by this time her eyes could hardly see him as he bent over her. And in low, steady tones she began telling him her dying wishes. "Thou seest, Admetus, what doom the Fates have brought me. Yet, ere I go, I must tell thee what wish lies nearest my heart. I have honoured thee in life; and when the need arose, I have been glad and willing to give my own life in the place of thine. And so I go—though truly, I might have stayed; I might have lived on after thee, choosing what man I would from all the princes of Thessaly, to be my second lord and to rule here in state with me. But I had no wish to live on without thee, nor to see these thy children fatherless. Gladly I die, Admetus; even though the blessings of youth were still mine, to have made life precious. And yet thy father and mother who gave thee life have deserted thee. Each had the chance to die for thee — and to die gloriously, famous for all time as the saviour of their son. They let this chance go by."

In silence, Admetus bowed his head. He had found it hard to bear, that neither his father nor his mother would save him; and now harder still, as he must stand and watch his wife slip from him, beyond recall. Alcestis spoke again:

"They had no child but thee. They had reached old age, and therefore had no hope of another son, if thou wert taken from them. Had they been willing, I might have lived on, and thou too, to a like old age. Thou needst not then have mourned the death of thy wife, nor grieved that our children must be brought up henceforth by their father alone. But some god has decreed that our fate should be this, and so it must be. Do thou repay me, Admetus, for the love I have borne thee, in the way I shall show."

"Ah, tell me how I can repay thee!" King Admetus exclaimed.

"Not by an equal sacrifice. I do not ask for a life. Yet my prayer is a just one, as thou shalt agree; for thou dost love these children as dearly as I—" The dying woman raised herself; and with a look of pitying love towards the boy and girl, caught her husband's hands. "Let them grow up to rule our house! Marry not again; for if thou dost, thou mayst set over them as stepmother some evil woman, who will not care for them as I. Such a stepmother, in jealousy, because I bore them to thee, will plot against their lives. Beware of this! I beg thee, beware of it! For to the children of a former marriage, a stepmother is more cruel than a serpent's tooth. Beware, Admetus!" And when the king was beginning to reassure her, the lady Alcestis resumed: "My son, who is already thy comrade in talk and play, has a

sure protector in thee. But what of my daughter? Who shall look after her young life, if thou shalt marry again? Rather, thy new wife will attack her with cruel lies, rob her of her fair name, and bring it to pass that no man shall deign to marry her, young though she be." And looking towards the child, Alcestis went on sadly: "Thy mother shall never see thee married, little daughter, nor shall she be with thee when thou most needest her, at the birth of thy own child. For I must die. This fate will not be delayed, not even for a day. Soon they will number me among the departed. Farewell, and be happy—!" She turned back to her lord. "And thou, my husband, canst proclaim to all men that thy wife was virtuous; and my children shall honour me."

"Fear not for that" one of the old men of the city broke in. "I give my sacred promise, lady, that thy name shall be glorified, so long as men's memories endure!"

And Admetus promised too. "Thou shalt be honoured for all time. And oh, fear not that I will ever marry another! I pledge thee my word. For in life thou wast only mine; and in death thou shalt still remain my wife for ever. No woman of Thessaly shall ever call me husband—no, nor of any other country, I swear! However beautiful she be, however nobly born of a race of kings, no other woman shall come here as my bride. The gods have blessed me with these children; I wish for no more. And I pray heaven that they may comfort me, since all the joy that I had in thee is lost. Men left as I, are wont to mourn their loss for a year; not for a year alone shall I mourn thee, Alcestis, but for the rest of

my life!" And then the king broke out in bitter wrath, as he recalled again the old parents who might have saved him. "How hateful they are!" he cried. "Their love for me was shown in words alone, not in deeds. But thou hast saved me, buying back my life by the greatest sacrifice of all. How shall I ever cease to weep for the loss of so true a wife? Henceforth I renounce all joy—feasting, the merry fellowship of my friends, the festive garlands that we used to wear as we laughed and sang together. Ah, never again will I take up my harp, nor raise my voice in song to the sweet notes of the African flute! With thee dies all my happiness. But I will have thy figure wrought, by a skilled artist's hand, that I may lay it in my bed, and clasp it, and call on thee by name; so may I dream that I still hold the form of my dear wife in my arms, that I possess her still—though she is taken away. Ah, wretched comfort! And yet better than none, if I can call thy name in sleep, and think I see thee in my dreams; since even an unreal vision of the night may bring some brief joy to my soul!"

And then the thoughts of the unhappy king returned to the journey that Alcestis must make, when Death's messenger should come for her; and he remembered how the singer Orpheus (so legends told) had made his way alone to the underworld, seeking his dead wife: and how he had charmed the rulers of the dead with his song, so that they even suffered him to take his wife back to earth. "Ah, had I the voice of Orpheus! Had I the power to charm the Queen of Night with my song, and her husband Pluto—I would go down like him, and win thee back from their kingdom. Grim Charon should not stop

me, the Ferryman of the Dead: nor the hell-dog that guards the gates of Hades beyond. I would not rest till I had led thee back to the light of the sun."

But such hopes were vain, as Admetus well knew. The price of his escape from death had been fixed; and now that price must be paid. "Wait for me" he implored "in the underworld! Wait there for me, till my time comes to die; prepare a house for us in that dark land, where we may one day dwell again together. For in thy tomb my people shall bury me—in the same coffin of cedar-wood, laid by thy side. Not even in death will I be parted from thee, whom alone I have found true!"

He ceased; and once more the voices of the old men of Pherae were raised. "For her sake we share thy sorrow, O king, as friends grieving with a friend. How can we ever mourn enough, for one so faithful as she?"

Alcestis spoke again, faint and low. "Do you hear, children? Do you hear what your father promises—never to do you injury, nor to dishonour me, by taking another wife."

"Again I swear it!" King Admetus exclaimed. "My promise shall stand unbroken."

"Then take these children from my hands" the dying woman commanded. "I give them into thy care."

Admetus' tears fell fast. "Â dear gift, from thy dear hands" he repeated brokenly.

"Be thou a mother to them, when their own mother is gone."

"That must I be indeed, since they are losing thee" he answered. Then his grief mastered him,

and he turned from the children to fling himself on the ground by the couch of his wife. "Alas, how shall I go on living without thee?" he wept.

"Time will soon heal thy grief" she told him gently. "The dead pass out of mind."

"O, take me with thee! Take me down with thee, in the name of the gods—"

But she smiled tenderly, and slowly shook her head. "It is enough that one of us should die" she said.

"O Fate, of what a wife art thou robbing me!" King Admetus cried.

For now, those who stood watching saw that the lady Alcestis' death was very close at hand. They heard her murmur, so softly that they could scarce catch the words: "My eyes are heavy. I cannot see—"

"I am lost, lost, if thou forsake me!" came Admetus' despairing cry.

"I am as one that is no more. I am nothing—" she sighed.

"Ah, lift thy head. Look on thy children! Forsake them not!"

But the dying queen lay back, and her lips scarcely moved. "It must be so" she breathed. "Dear children, farewell!"

"Look on them,! look on them! Ah, do not leave us!"

"Farewell—" Once more she tried to speak the words. Then she fell back, dead.

Admetus lay stretched beside the couch, blind with bitter tears. Those who watched could not tell if he yet knew that Alcestis was no more; but the

young boy Eumelus saw her head drop back, and burst into loud laments:

"Alas, what shall I do? My mother sinks to the dark land of Night! She sees the sun no longer! Now I must face life's troubles alone, motherless!" He plucked at his father's robe. "Her eyes, father—see her eyes! They are closed, and her hand falls lifeless—" And when Admetus paid no heed, the boy sprang forward, throwing himself full-length on the couch by his mother's side. "Yet hear me, mother! Hear me calling! It is I—I, Eumelus! Ah, wake, and hear me!"

And then his father drew him gently away. "She cannot hear, nor see" he told the little boy gently. "You and I must bend beneath the heaviest load that men have to endure."

But Eumelus was weeping piteously. "She has left me in youth" he wailed. "My mother, my darling mother is no more. Alone I bear my sorrows now. Who shall comfort me? And thou, my sister—" he turned towards the girl: "thou shalt have thy full share of grief, to break thy heart. Oh father, you were wed in vain! For here your marriage ends; she is dead, and our home is dead with her!"

An old man, spokesman of the citizens, came softly forward now, and lovingly touched his lord. "These ills must perforce be borne, Admetus" he counselled him, as old friend to old friend. "Thou art not the first of men to lose a virtuous wife, nor shalt be the last. Remember, death is as a debt, which all must pay soon or late."

"I know it well" King Admetus answered him. "I have foreseen it; I have wept, long ago—" And

the old man was silent; for to have known of evil in advance is but poor comfort, when the day of evil arrives. Admetus raised himself. "I must take up her body and prepare it for burial" he said. "Wait here. And while you wait, since all our prayers for her deliverance have been vain, pray now to the cruel god that reigns in the underworld. He is her lord now; call on him, chanting the alternate hymn for the dead. And be it known, I lay on all the folk of Thessaly this solemn command: that in deep grief for this dear woman they shall shear their locks, and don black robes of mourning; that they shall also clip the long manes of their horses—of those that draw their chariots, yoked in pairs, and of those that bear single riders; further, that neither sound of flute nor of harp shall be heard in the city of Pherae, till twelve moons have gone by. For never, never shall I bury one dearer to me, nor one more kind and true. These honours she shall have while I am king; for she only was found to die for me."

So saying, the stricken king turned slowly towards his house, and passed from their view. The two children followed him. The bearers lifted up the couch on which Alcestis' body lay, and bore it within. And as the last slaves closed the huge bronze doors, deep silence fell again; and the old men of Pherae, sorrowing, were left to raise the Hymn of Lamentation for the dead.

CHAPTER VI

Meanwhile, unknown to them, another friend of King Admetus was sturdily making his way across the plain of Thessaly towards the gates of their town. As he passed through the villages on his northward way, men turned and stared after him; nor, though there were many robbers at large in those days, did any of them feel tempted to challenge this traveller.

He was a huge man—thickset, half as broad again across the back as the best of the men he met; his neck was thick and short, and sinewy as the trunk of a tree; and the great knotted muscles of his legs showed rippling beneath the sunburnt skin, as he strode forward on his way, without a thought for either the robbers that peeped fearfully at him from behind their rocks, or for the blazing sun above.

His dress was a lion's skin (he had slain the lion with his bare hands, men said, down south in the mountains of the Argives' country) which he wore whole as he had stripped it from the beast; its front claws were buckled across his mighty chest, and its muzzle shadowed his face. And his sole weapon was a huge club, slung from his shoulder.

You may remember how Apollo warned the Messenger of Death, that one was coming who might yet compel him to forego his prey. This traveller was he—none other than Hercules, the strongest man on earth: who was now faring towards the city of his old friend Admetus, though he knew nothing of the disaster that had befallen him. Indeed, the huge man seemed merry enough, for all his fierce appearance, as he tramped northwards singing snatches of songs

in his deep rumbling voice, and looking forward already to seeing his old friend again.

The Strong Man was on a journey—he was a great traveller—and was now bound for Thrace, far up to the north, where he had promised to catch the savage horses of King Diomede, which were more fierce than bulls and devoured human flesh. For at this time, Hercules had bound himself to serve King Eurystheus of Tiryns, and to perform the twelve hard labours which Eurystheus had asked of him. Seven were already done. The slaying of the lion had been the first of them; and he had followed that by ridding Greece of many other monsters, deadly to men—a dragon that lived in the Lernaean Marsh, a boar, a savage bull, and the strange birds that nested on Lake Stymphalus and fed on men's flesh. He had cleaned out the stables of King Augeas, too, digging a channel into which he diverted a great river to flood them. There was no task too hard for him, no man nor monster that could withstand his huge strength.

The sun was still high above his head as he strode into Pherae, marvelling to find the market place so desolate and the streets hushed and empty. "Something must be amiss" the huge man said to himself. "Some plague, or defeat in war. May be Admetus will be all the more pleased that I have come!"

He climbed the palace hill, and drew near the big bronze gates. And there he saw the crowd of Admetus' subjects, and the sound of their wailing voices came to his ears. They were grouped round the marble stairs, and as the Strong Man sighted them, they had just started chanting their hymn for

the dead. There was still no one near to tell him what had happened, and he was not yet close enough to hear what they sang; but grief was held sacred by the Greeks, so he paused in the shadow of a house, some distance away, and there stayed till the dirge should be ended.

This was the hymn which the old men were chanting—a hymn of mourning for their queen, and of praise for the wondrous sacrifice she had made;

"Immortal joy be thine, O daughter of Pelias! And may immortal blessedness reward thee in the world beneath, even though thou canst not any more behold the light of our sun! Let Pluto, King of Death, be told of thy fair renown! Let Charon hear of it, that old ferryman, whose rough hands grasp his pole to carry the dead across. Let him be told that never yet has he received in his grim boat so precious a burden! Tell him, it is the noblest of her sex who now is brought to him, taking her dreary journey over the waters of Night!"

They sang in alternate groups, as the Greek custom was; and when the first choir had chanted so much of the Hymn, the second took up the strain;

"Poets shall sing thy praise, when they lift up their voice in a hymn of triumph: or when their fingers sweep the harp and wake music from the seven-stringed shell. In pleasant Sparta shall they sing of thee, in turn, when they have met together to hold festival in the spring: whilst the high moon rolls full and round through the quiet night. Or in rich Athens, whose proud buildings crown the brow of the hill. Then shall they praise thee, and the glorious

death thou hast died; and the loud song of triumph shall swell up in thy honour!"

The first group sang again—more sadly now, as they recalled how merciless a fate had taken Alcestis from them, and how powerless they were against Death:

"O that more strength were ours! O, could we bring thee back from the land of Night, so that thou couldst once more behold this blessed light of the sun! Could we but snatch thee from the ferryman's boat, and bring thee home from that unhappy shore, where the wide river of Hades flows! For thou alone, O best of women, didst dare to buy thy husband's life with thy own. Be thou for ever holy; and may the earth lie light on thy gentle breast! But, should he ever wed again, may he be scorned by us and by thy children!"

And once more the second chorus took up the dirge, adding their praises to the glory of Alcestis' name, and wondering anew at her sacrifice:

"Not even his mother dared to lie in earth, to save the life of her son. Nor was his father willing to die for him. Yet death had come to King Admetus untimely, whereas his parents were both old. The hand of time had touched them, their hairs were white. But thou wast young and lovely; thou wast full of joy; none the less thou didst sacrifice thy joy and thy youth, that thy lord's might not perish. Thou didst not fear to tread the dark road of death. Ah, that the wives of other men might prove faithful as thee!"

The dirge ended; and presently the old men, looking towards the town, saw the huge stranger approaching them. They had no need to ask each

other who he might be. His mighty form, his club and his lion-skin, were already famed throughout Greece. At once they recognised the hero, Hercules, whom they knew for a friend of their king. And his first words to them, as he drew near the gates, were to enquire for Admetus.

"Ho, citizens of Pherae!" his deep voice came booming. "Tell me if I shall find Admetus at home in his house?"

"He is there, Hercules" one of the old men replied. "But tell us, what brings thee travelling through Thessaly to Admetus' town?"

The huge man laughed merrily. "Work, work! I serve King Eurystheus, still. Twelve heavy tasks he set me, and they are not yet done."

"And where art thou roving now? What is this latest toil that he has bid thee to do?" the old man asked with interest; while the rest watched and listened eagerly, in wonder at the mighty bulk of the hero, of whom they had heard such tales.

Hercules answered, that the King of Tiryns had sent him to Thrace, that he might catch and tame the four wild horses of Diomede.

They stared at him in awe. "How can so terrible a feat be done?" they exclaimed. "Art thou a stranger to that country? Dost thou not know—"

"Aye, I have never yet set foot in King Diomede's land" replied Hercules, laughing at their dismay.

They began warning him; for there was not a man in Greece but had heard about Diomede's horses, how strong and how fierce they were. "It will be no easy task to subdue them" they doubted. But

Hercules shrugged his great shoulders, and laughed again.

"I have no choice" he said. "My promise binds me to King Eurystheus. I may not shun whatever work he commands me to do."

"To tame King Diomede's horses is hard enough" one of the old men cried. "But that is not all. King Diomede himself must be slain first; for he will kill thee or be killed, rather than let thee lay thy hands on his team."

But the huge hero showed no sign of being dismayed by their fears. "This is not my first labour, nor my last" he reminded them cheerfully.

"And if thou dost succeed in killing the king, what then?" asked one of the citizens.

"Why, I shall drive his horses back through Greece, to my master Eurystheus."

"First thou wilt have to bridle them. No easy task, I fear!" was the citizen's reply.

"Easy or not, it is a task I shall face. Though I have heard that they resemble dragons, and breathe fire from their nostrils."

"Aye, and their jaws have torn men's flesh for food" someone reminded him, recalling tales that he had heard of those terrible steeds.

But Hercules shook his head. He had heard that story himself, but he was not prepared to believe all the rumours he was told. "To eat men's flesh" he said "is the act of cannibals — wild men, who live in the hills. Horses seek not such food, however savage they may be!"

He found, however, that the old men of Pherae still held to their belief. "Thou shalt see for thyself"

they warned the hero. "Thou shalt find that their mangers are all stained with blood."

Hercules still seemed doubtful about this, but did not again contradict them. Perhaps it occurred to him that the Pheraeans, living so near to Thrace, might after all know more about the horses of Diomede than himself. Instead, he put a question to the old men, concerning the horses' master. "This Diomede, who is he? Of what race is he born?"

The Pheraeans could tell him that, without any difficulty. "He is the son of Mars, the God of War" they informed him. "A mighty warrior, therefore; and he rules over the fierce Thracians, whose shields are of gold."

The hero nodded. This was the first time he had heard of Diomede's parentage; but it did not seem to surprise him. "I think" he said "that it must always be my fate to be matched with the War-God's sons, in every dangerous adventure that comes to me! Lycaon was the first. Then Cygnus. And now it is the proud lord of these savage horses that I must fight. But I have never yet shown fear, nor shall I show it, however terrible may be the foes that I have to fight."

While they talked, crowding round the hero to question him, the great bronze doors above were once more swung open, and a figure appeared on the steps. One of the old men turned; next moment he called for silence, whispering:

"The king!"

It was Admetus himself who stood there in the sun, looking down at them.

CHAPTER VII

You may have wondered why the citizens had not yet told Hercules their sad news: especially since Hercules was an old friend of Admetus, and had entered into talk with them so near to the house of mourning.

Partly, no doubt, it was because they were so interested to meet the great hero, of whom they had heard such tales. But there was also a much stronger reason; and the fact that the hero was Admetus' friend, was more likely to make the men of Pherae keep silence, than to prompt them to confide in him.

One of the holiest and most binding customs of Greece was the law of hospitality. To the old Greeks, a guest was sacred. He must be welcomed and put at his ease, whatever else was neglected. This law held good, not only when the guest was a friend, but when he was quite a stranger. It even covered enemies; for the old legends of the Greeks were full of instances, where a man fleeing for his life, perhaps, took refuge at the hearth of one whom he thought a stranger, but whom he presently found out to be a former enemy of his. In such a case, if the man fleeing for his life had once gained the hearth, he was safe. For the hearth was the centre of the home; it was the site of the most sacred altar of the household. And if the master of the house found anyone taking refuge there, he had to save him from his enemies, even though in former times the two had themselves been foes.

Admetus, therefore, would have been ashamed to turn his old friend away, even today when he was

mourning his wife. But there was yet another custom in Greece, no less strong than the first. That was the custom of respect for the dead. If Hercules had known of Alcestis' death, he would have gone to any trouble and journeyed any distance, rather than intrude on his old friend at so sad a time. The citizens, of course, were fully aware of this; at the same time, they knew that King Admetus would not wish his old friend turned away. So it became their duty by Greek laws, and as loyal subjects of the king, to tell the stranger nothing of what had occurred. No doubt they hoped that Hercules might go on his way, in ignorance; or that the silence of the palace, and the closed doors, might warn him that something was amiss. But the arrival of Admetus made it impossible that the two friends should not greet each other; and by the law of hospitality Admetus was bound to welcome him, if he presented himself at the gate as a guest.

Hercules, certainly, had not suspected the truth. For when he saw Admetus at the head of the stairs, he gave a great shout of joy and ran forward to meet him. King Admetus held out both hands.

"Hail, son of Zeus!" he cried.

The two friends met and embraced. And then, for the first time, the hero noticed that Admetus' hair was clipped short, in token of mourning. At once his merry laughter ceased, and he asked anxiously, in fear lest he had come at an unfitting time:

"For whom dost thou mourn?"

But Admetus had seen already that the old men had told Hercules nothing. And being noble, he resolved that the guest should not be turned away.

So he said, quietly, concealing his grief: "For one of my household, whom today I must bury."

Something in Admetus' voice, however, made the hero suspect; and his first fear was that Admetus might have lost one of his children. "May the gods grant thou dost not mourn for a child!" he exclaimed.

The king shook his head. "My children are both alive, and in the palace" he answered.

"Thy father, then? Is it he who is dead?" Hercules knew how very old his friend's father was, so his thoughts turned to him next. But once more, Admetus reassured him.

"My father still lives—and my mother too" he answered.

Hercules looked grave. Somehow, despite the king's attempt to hide what he felt, it seemed to Hercules that he was more distressed than anyone would be, who had lost only a slave or a hired servant. But, if the old folk and the children were safe, there remained only one whose loss could touch Admetus so nearly. "Is it—is it Alcestis?" he asked anxiously. "Ah, surely thou hast not lost *her*?"

"Thou mayst say I have lost her, whether she lives or dies" returned Admetus quietly. The old men meanwhile were listening, full of pity for the king; for they saw he did not mean to tell the truth, and so turn his friend away, if he could possibly help it.

But Hercules was puzzled by this last answer. "I do not understand" he said. "If she were dead thou wouldst have lost her indeed. But if she lives, how canst thou say she is lost?"

"Dost thou not know the destiny appointed for her?" his friend asked.

Then Hercules remembered a strange rumour that had come to him on his wanderings: namely, that Queen Alcestis had declared she would die for her lord, if ever such need arose; and that the gods had agreed to accept her instead of him.

"I know that she is willing to die for thee" he replied.

Admetus nodded. "This being so, is not my wife as good as lost to me already?" he said; and by thus answering, contrived to meet the anxious questions of his old friend, without telling an actual lie.

And King Admetus succeeded. For the simple Hercules, whose strength lay in his body rather than in his brains, was quite taken in. "Why, then" he exclaimed more cheerfully, "do not mourn too soon! It may be many a long year before the gods claim their bargain!"

"And yet her death is sure". Admetus reminded him, "since the fates have decreed that I must lose her in the end."

"But that is not at all the same as if thou hadst lost her already" cried Hercules, quite cheerfully now. "Take courage, man! There is no need for thee to mourn for her yet!"

"That is thy view" Admetus answered. "As for me, I think otherwise."

Hercules shook his head. He felt unable to argue about so strange an opinion. But he was full of relief to find, as he believed, that his friend had not after all lost anyone near to him. Then he recalled that Admetus had still not told him who it was

that had died. "Which of thy friends is dead, then?" he pursued.

"A woman" Admetus told him. "It was a woman of my household, of whom I was speaking just now."

"A stranger?" the hero asked. He now assumed that the dead woman was one of Admetus' slaves; and the king let him go on thinking so. "Or one of thy own race?"

"She was of foreign birth" answered the king: still telling Hercules the truth, since Queen Alcestis was a foreign princess before he had married her. "Of foreign birth,—but none the less, dear to me."

"But if this woman was a foreigner, how did she chance to die here in thy house?" Hercules enquired.

"Because she came here as an orphan, after her father's death" was the king's reply.

The hero had now quite satisfied himself, that his friend was not mourning one of his family (as Hercules had at first feared) but someone of lesser account. At the same time he felt that respect was due to death, even to the death of a slave. He hitched his club across his shoulders again, as though preparing to leave. "I would that I had not found thee in such trouble, old friend" he exclaimed.

"Thou dost mean—?" Admetus asked.

"That I must seek the house of some other friend. I cannot intrude in thine."

But Admetus cried out against that, in sincere dismay. "Not so, Hercules! By the gods, my house is open to thee. I would not have thee go farther."

"No guest can be welcome in a house of mourning" the hero excused himself. "Let me go elsewhere."

But Admetus caught his hands. "The dead are dead. They cannot be brought back. So, enter thou my house, none the less."

He pointed towards the open doors, but the hero still paused, reluctant. "It were a shameful thing for me to sit down and feast with my friends that mourn—"

"But we have rooms apart, and we can entertain thee in those" Admetus assured him.

"Nay, let me go Admetus! I will thank thee better for that."

"It may not be. By heaven, thou shalt not turn aside to any other man's house while I live!" Admetus' arm went round the huge shoulders of his friend, and he beckoned to his slaves. "Go, you!" he ordered. "Throw open the guest-rooms on the other side of the house. Let food in plenty be prepared, that my friend may refresh himself. And let the doors between be shut" he added privately, "that the sound of our mourning may not harshly interrupt our guest at his meal."

So Hercules—reluctant still, yet touched by the welcome which Admetus had shown him—followed the slaves through the bronze doors, and disappeared into the palace.

CHAPTER VIII

Admetus lingered for a moment; and one of his old friends, pitying him, and yet unable not to admire the noble welcome which he had given to Hercules, tried to intervene.

"O king, what wilt thou do? In such a time of grief, how canst thou bear to receive a guest? Would it not have been wiser to let him go elsewhere?

But the king turned on him. "What! Wouldst thou have rather seen me turn him from my house or my city? I know well that thou wouldst not praise me for such a deed. Nor would my grief be any less if I had sent him away. I should have only added to my sorrows this one sorrow more, namely, to hear men call my house 'the house that hates strangers'. Besides, this hero is no common guest, but one that has earned my goodwill; for whenever I have journeyed into the thirsty land of Argos, I have never failed to find his welcome awaiting me, and his doors standing wide. It is not right to refuse any traveller: much less such a friend as Hercules!"

"But since he is so old a friend" argued the citizen, "surely there was no need to hide thy grief from him, as from a stranger?"

But Admetus would not agree. "If he had known the truth, he would not have entered" he said; and went on, sadly—"Let men think I have acted wrongly, if they will. I care not for their blame. But I hold fast to this—that whatever befalls, no guest shall even find himself dishonoured by me, or turned from my door." And without further words, the king went back into his palace, whence the dead body of Alcestis must soon be borne out for burial.

The old men remained outside, and once more their voices were raised in a solemn hymn. But now the chant was changed; no longer wailing for the disaster that had smitten Admetus' house, they began rather to sing praises of its greatness, and to recount how generous its noble lord had ever been towards strangers.

"How oft, Admetus, hath thy house—thy friendly house!—opened its princely gates to a guest! How oft hath the weary stranger blessed thee, finding the royal feast prepared for him at the end of the day!"

And from this point the song, remembering the noblest guest of all those who had cause to praise the bounty of King Admetus, became a hymn to Apollo. "The god himself once dwelt here—Apollo, the god of song. Beneath this roof he strung his harp, and its silvery voice was heard here. For the god, mingling with the royal slaves, was content to be called the shepherd of King Admetus, and to feed his flocks in the plain. For a full year he pastured them; and as he drove them afield—whether they lingered on the wooded hills or roamed the winding valleys—Apollo played his shepherd's pipe, or raised his voice in song."

And then the second chorus, taking up the hymn, told how the god's sweet music had brought peace and welfare.

"Charmed with the sound, the savage brigand of the hills no longer thirsts for man's blood. The spotted cubs of lynxes, doing no harm, play amid the timid sheep and give them no cause for fear. The lion slinks down from the steep rocks of Mount Othrys, down to the vales below, rejoicing to hear thy pipe,

Apollo. And when thy lyre is heard, the spotted hinds leap for joy; for they too have left their forests, high on the hills, since they have heard thy sweet voice float up to them. Lightly they leap and dance, with nimble feet; for a god is plucking the harp-strings."

And the first chorus followed on; recounting how Apollo, in gratitude for Admetus' kindness, had blessed and increased his fortunes.

"Hence, King Admetus, is thy house enriched with wealth and plenty,—thy house that stands beside the pleasant stream from Lake Boebia. Thy lands stretch far away to the west, rich pastures for thy flocks, and fields that thy farmers reap. Molossis is its boundary—Molossis, that dark mountain-land where the sun unyokes his chariot. And on the eastern side, thy kingdom reaches out to meet his first morning rays, where proud Mount Pelion towers above the lonely shores of the Aegean Sea. Aye, from the eastern sea unto the western is thy rule known! So rich and mighty a king art thou, by the grace of the god!"

And the second chorus answered once again: to tell how even now, at so unhappy a time, the ancient kindness of the king had prevailed.

"Yet, rich and mighty as thou art, even now thy royal gates are once more flung wide, to shelter the wandering guest; even now, though sorrow wrings thy heart and the hot tears fall from thy eyes! Thy wife, so lately taken from thee, lies still within; the mourners stand about her, and the voice of their weeping is heard. But Nature has made thee just and kind; and the good heart is ever swift to suggest the good deed. Wise art thou, King Admetus, and

generous. And my sad heart knows well, that thou shalt find the comfort which is the reward of the just!"

And now the old men ceased again; for once more the palace gates were opening, and the mourning train appeared. First came the bodyguard of slaves, in their long black robes. The bearers followed, with the corpse of Alcestis on a bier. Lastly, the king himself. Slowly, Admetus descended the marble stairs and addressed his old friends.

"Ye men of Pherae, my kind subjects! To you I bring out my dead, adorned with the splendour that is her due, on her way to the tomb. Stand by me now, old friends—for such is our ancient custom—and as she takes her last sad journey, speak her name in farewell!"

The old men came forward with reverence, and were approaching the bier, when they drew back in surprise, and an uneasy whisper spread among them. For they saw, coming up the hill from the town, a second procession of dark-robed figures with an aged man at their head. It was old Pheres, father of King Admetus, who had arrived with his own train of slaves bearing rich funeral-gifts. They stole a look at the king; and as he sighted Pheres and his company, they saw his face grow grim. But old Pheres came forward, and spoke.

"I have come here, my son, as one who shares thy griefs. For thou hast lost the best and most loving of wives, as all our city knows. Yet must thou needs endure this loss, hard though it be." He paused, as he concluded the short speech of sympathy, which the custom of funerals demanded. But his son

answered not a word. And by and by old Pheres, nervous and ill at ease, went on: "Receive these ornaments and presents which I bring in Alcestis' honour. Let her be decked with them; it is right we should honour her together, since she has died to save thee; she would not let me be left childless, nor live to see me waste the sad last years of my life, robbed of thee."

And still Admetus was silent.

"She hath made all her sex more glorious" the old father went on "by this noble deed. O daughter Alcestis, thou that hast saved my son, I salute thee! Mayst thou be blessed, even in the Land of the Dead! For when his fortune sends him such a wife as thee, a man's marriage is blessed."

And then the fear of the old citizens was realised, and Admetus' anger blazed forth. "Thou comest not to her funeral by my wish!" he cried bitterly. "Nor can I look upon thy presence here as the presence of a friend." And with a furious gesture, he waved back the slaves who were bringing forward Pheres' gifts. "Never shall she be decked in thy ornaments! Nor shall her funeral be insulted by any present of thine!"

"My son—!" the old man exclaimed.

But Admetus towered over him, threatening and angry. "There was a time for thee to show thy grief at my fate, when my death was demanded. Thou didst not help me then. Old as thou art, thou couldst stand cowardly aside and leave thy son to his doom. And now, dost thou dare to come here and join in my mourning? Art thou my father? No!"

Old Pheres tried to speak again, but the king would not listen. "No father of mine, I say! Nor is

the woman who says she brought me forth, my mother. She stole me, the child of some base slave, and put me to her breast and said I was thine. For thy own deeds prove plainly that thou art not my father. Nor will I ever let myself be called a son of thine, who art more mean and cowardly of heart than any man in the world. My father, dost thou say? What a father thou art! So old, so near the very brink of life, thou wouldst not die—thou daredst not die—to save him who was supposed to be thy son! But you could stand by idle, thou and thy wife, and see her make this sacrifice, though she was born of foreign blood and not one of our house. Is it not just, then, that I should call her alone my father and my mother?"

The king paused; and then, recalling once again the way in which his parents had deserted him, he broke out with renewed taunts. "And yet thou hadst the chance to do a most glorious act, if thou hadst been willing to die. How little of life was left thee! How little to lose, and what high honour to win! I had long life before me, and so had she. We might have lived on to old age, she and I together, nor need I now have been bewailing her loss."

And he grew still more bitter, as he remembered how full and happy a life his old father had lived already. "From thy birth, thou hadst had all that makes men happy and blessed. Thou wast brought up as a prince, and didst spend youth and middle-age as a reigning king. Thou hadst a son to inherit thy state from thee: thou hadst no need to die unhappy and childless, in the fear that some plundering stranger would seize thy wealth. Nor canst thou say that thou didst give me up to death as a son who showed

thee no honour. I gave thee love and reverence—little though thou hast repaid them to me!"

And then, in mad rage and grief, Admetus added threats to the reproach and contempt which he had already uttered. "Go! Get more sons, if thou canst! Thou wilt need them to cherish thy old age, to pay thee honour at thy death, and to lay thee in thy grave. For never shall my hands do that duty for thee! So far as any help from thee is concerned, I am dead already! And if I still live on, why, then I count myself the son of her that delivered me, not of thee. Begone! Old men tell lies, when they profess that life is tedious to them, and that they would wish to die: when they complain of age and the slow passage of time! For when death comes indeed, they think otherwise; no longer do they find fault with their feeble state. For they fear to go!"

Admetus ceased at last, worn out with his rage and grief. And the old citizens at once began to try and heal the quarrel. "Forbear!" they begged. "Do we not suffer grief enough, as it is? My son, goad not thy father into bitter words!"

But they spoke in vain. At first, old Pheres had been too upset and shocked to protest. But as his son went on reproaching and taunting him, his own anger rose; and he now burst forth, bitter and contemptuous as Admetus himself:

"Dost thou mistake me for some cheap Lydian slave, Admetus, or for some Phrygian whom thou hast bought with thy gold? Hast thou forgotten I am Thessalian born, of a Thessalian father, and noble too? Dost thou presume to stand there and insult me like an impudent boy? By the gods, thou shalt listen to

some truths from me, in thy turn!" And he began at once to recall to his son's mind all that he had done for him, from his childhood up. "I gave thee birth: by that act making thee the heir of a fair heritage. I brought thee up; the cost and care of every hour of thy nurture was mine, and mine were the slaves that served thee. Nay, I boast not of that—" the old man went on quickly, before Admetus could speak. "That was my duty as thy father, and I rendered it gladly. Was it my duty, though, to take thy place when Death came knocking at the door? By heaven, I know of no such law—that fathers must die for their sons; nor is it known to any other father in Greece, I think! For better or worse, thou was allotted thine own destiny at thy birth—thine own life to live. From me thou hast received what it was right for me to give thee; thou hast ruled over a great realm, and I shall leave thee yet more lands at my death; for I received these from my father, and they pass duly to thee. How have I wronged thee, then? Of what have I ever cheated thee, what have I withheld? Or do I ask thee to die for me? Why then should I die for thee?"

Admetus began to answer him. But now the old man in turn would listen to no argument, and went on, disregarding him: "It is a joy to thee, thou sayest, to see the light of the sun. Dost thou think I take no such joy? I have lived many a year, I know; yet life is short enough, and I take pleasure in all of it. Thou, shameless one, hast tried to shirk thy fate and to live on beyond the span of life that the gods allotted: and hast succeeded—aye, by killing thy wife! Am *I* mean? Is *my* spirit cowardly? Why, thou

poor wretch, how canst thou venture to bring such a charge against me? A woman puts thee to shame—a woman who freely died for thee the death that thou daredst not face, though thou wert young and strong, and as well able to endure the stroke of death as she! Thou hast found out a fine way to go on living for ever, if, at each time when Death comes to thy door, thou canst persuade whatever woman is then thy wife to meet him in thy stead! Yet thou, base coward as thou art, canst load thy friends with insults if they refuse to save thee. Go to! Restrain thy foolish tongue; and remember, if life be dear to thee, it is dear to all. If thou wilt not remember this, and wilt persist in casting thy reproaches at thy friends, be sure they will tell thee truly what they think of thy deeds!"

Old Pheres ceased then, worn out by the force of his rage. And the wise citizens once more stepped forward, to heal this unseeemly brawl.

"Too many hard words have already been spoken" they urged. "Forbear, old man! Revile not thy son in his grief."

But Admetus, angry and full of contempt, was prompt to reply. "Let him rave as he likes" he broke out savagely. "I have said what I think of him. If he dislikes being told the truth, he should not have wronged me!"

"It would have been a greater wrong, if I had consented to die for thee!" the old man retorted.

And Admetus, returning to what seemed to him the strongest argument on his side, asked again: "Is death the same thing to the young and to the old?"

But Pheres still refused to be convinced. "Each man is given one life" he repeated doggedly. "By what right should he hope for two?"

"Oh, mayst thou linger on in miserable old age, till thou outlive the very gods!" Admetus stormed at him.

"What! Dost thou dare to curse thy parents, who have done thee no harm?" his father demanded.

"Thou didst me harm enough, when I saw with what mad desire thou didst covet long life" cried the king.

Old Pheres ceased arguing now, for he saw that his son was too angry to listen to reason. Instead, he backed away, and was content in sneering tones to mock the wrath that confronted him. Full of malice, he pointed at the still figure on the bier. "Away, and busy thyself elsewhere!" he mocked. "Bury her, and be thankful. She has died for thee!"

"Aye, she bears witness to thy cowardly spirit" was the king's retort.

Pheres laughed harshly. "At least thou canst not say *I* killed her!" he pointed out.

And Admetus could only answer, in hopeless rage: "Oh, I pray heaven that some day thou shalt need my aid!"

But the old man was ready with a more cruel and mocking retort. "Meanwhile, wed many wives" he advised his son, "that there may always be some-one to die for thee."

"Yet thy own shame will still stand for all men to see—because thou wouldst not help" Admetus assured him savagely.

"I care not" replied old Pheres, shaking his head. "The light of heaven is still sweet to me—by the gods, it is sweet!"

"Aye! That is thy one thought: a most base thought, unworthy of any man!"

But the other still mocked at him; for anger had long driven all feelings of sympathy from Pheres' mind. "Thou wouldst be glad enough to see me dead and gone, I dare say."

"Die when thou wilt!" stormed the king. "Thy end will find thee without honour among men, whenever it shall come."

"I shall not care how slightingly men speak of me, once I am dead" Pheres jeered.

"No. Thou art shameless. All old men are shameless!" Admetus exclaimed.

And once more, swift and merciless, came his old father's curt answer: "She was not shameless. But her love for thee proved her mad."

At this last, cruel reply, Admetus all at once fell silent; perhaps his conscience told him there was something in what his old father said; or perhaps he was too worn out with despair and grief to quarrel any longer. Pheres waited for a moment, watching him; then, with a shrug of his old shoulders, turned away. But his son's attitude had roused all the spite in his nature, so that he could not bear to take his leave (even now when Admetus seemed disposed to abuse him no more) without some last bitter words. "I go" he said. "Do thou thyself commit her to the tomb, since thou art her murderer. But beware of the vengeance of her folk" he added warningly.

"Her brother Acastus is no man, if he fail to require of thee the utmost penalty for this innocent death."

"Go then" replied Admetus in a broken voice—no longer loud with wrath, but deadened by his bitter pain. "Go, thou and thy good wife! Grow old together, childless as you deserve, though your son still lives. Come back here no more, never see me again! I will not meet you; I should tell my herald (were I shameless as you) to proclaim publicly that I forbade you ever to set foot again in this house, once your own. But go! I say no more!" And then, turning heavily towards the bier: "And let us go our way, since we must endure this sorrow, and lay her body on the funeral-pyre."

So the procession of death set out from the palace-gates, and wound slowly away; while the old father and mother, grieved and silent, turned their steps homewards.

It may occur to us, as we read of this dreadful and unseemly quarrel in the presence of the dead, that Admetus was much to blame: and that some of the taunts he levelled at his father, about fearing to die, were equally true of himself. But as we have already seen, a Greek audience felt differently. To them, the question was not: 'Why should an old man be expected to die any more than a young one?' but 'Why should a great and just king cease to guide his people, if by any sacrifice of less important lives that king's death could be prevented?' We may doubt if an audience nowadays would accept such a play, or at least accept King Admetus as its hero; so, when we feel disposed to criticise it, it is important that we

should keep the old Greeks' point of view in our mind. To them, (although Alcestis was the heroine of the play) the hero was Admetus; they had no doubts about that; they did not question his position, or ever think of him as a coward. We can be sure of that; for if it had been otherwise—if there had been the least risk of the audience blaming Admetus—no dramatist would have ventured to make his story into a play. All the same, certain modern scholars have made a suggestion which is full of interest, and which we may pause here to consider, before pursuing the story. It is this: Euripides, the dramatist of 'Alcestis', was a poet whose ideas (as we can see elsewhere in his plays) were a great deal in advance of the ideas of his day; so that he seems to us by far the most 'modern' of the old Greek tragedians. Now, Euripides did not invent the Alcestis story; it was already an old legend, nor would his audience have allowed him to alter its facts, which they all knew. Yet it may very well have been that the old story seemed, to Euripides, not quite the same story as it seemed to the rest of the Greeks. Perhaps he saw, more clearly than the rest, the weakness of Admetus' position! Perhaps he felt more sympathy for Pheres and his wife, and more pity for Alcestis! One almost thinks he did; for he makes Pheres argue very soundly. And if no other character questions Admetus' acts, we must remember that no one except his father would have dared to dispute with the king. It almost seems as though Euripides, through a fictitious character, were making the old tale teach a new lesson to the Greeks: as though the voice of Pheres were the voice of the poet himself.

But let us now go back to those big gates in the sunlight, and see how events which had begun so unhappily were to be guided, after all, to a joyous end.

CHAPTER IX

Slowly, the long procession in its dark robes wound away through the narrow streets—slaves first, then bearers carrying the body of Alcestis, with Admetus and his children behind: lastly the faithful friends, the old citizens of Pherae, who as they followed raised their voices once again in farewell to their loved queen:

"O thou unhappy one, who hast so nobly dared! Most bright and excellent, most loving—farewell! May Hermes who guides the dead receive thee kindly, and the King of the world beneath. Thou goest down into the dark, and no man knows what awaits thee; yet, if the good have any reward in that gloomy land, mayst thou be honoured there! May thy place be prepared for thee, near to the throne where sits Proserpina, the wife of Pluto himself! Farewell, farewell!"

The voices died away, as the procession passed slowly down the hill out of sight. For a little while, the bronze doors remained closed. But they opened presently, and a man came out alone, casting behind him angry and resentful glances towards the palace. He was the guest-slave or chamberlain—the servant whose duty was to wait on his master's guests, and whom Admetus had sent in just now to prepare a

banquet for Hercules. For the old laws of hospitality decreed, that a guest who came travelling must not only be welcomed and rested; he must be given food and wine, the best that was in the house; and the guest-slaves and chamberlain must attend on him, whatever the others of the household were doing.

This man had done as he was bidden by the king. But his love for Admetus made him bitter with rage, when he saw how the stranger had accepted his welcome, despite the signs of mourning that were visible in the house. And now he was angrier still, at the scene which had followed. Unable to endure his task any longer, he had burst from the gates and stood at the head of the stairs, trembling with wrath, and muttering to himself.

"To many a guest before this day—to strangers from every land—have I spread out the feast of welcome in this royal house. But never has my master bestowed his kindness on any viler one than this! This fellow saw my lord bowed down with his grief. He did not care, he did not pause. He entered, insolent in his pride. He might at least have taken his meal in silence, since he knew that the house which offered it was a house of sorrow. But not he! If there were anything he wished, that was not instantly brought, he cried out his harsh commands; and taking in both hands a wine-bowl wreathed with the ivy of merry-making, he filled it high with purple wine, which he kept quaffing in huge draughts till it inflamed him. Then, boisterous, he bound a myrtle garland on his head and began bawling his songs. To what harsh discord must we listen, we who stood by to serve him! Two strains we heard—

the first, that dismal howling of the drunken guest, who had no thought of reverence for Admetus' grief: the second, mingling with it from a distant part of the house, the cry of wailing from a household that mourned its queen. And yet we dared not weep ourselves, nor let the guest see our pain; for so the king had commanded. And while others carry her forth, my duty forces me to stay behind and wait on this fellow—this ruffian, this robber, as I think he is, who has come to despoil our house!" For the servant neither knew nor cared who the stranger was. And what grieved his faithful heart, almost as much as the behaviour of Hercules, was the thought that he must neglect the funeral-rites of his beloved queen, to attend on this riotous intruder. "So here must I needs remain; while she is borne away, out of her home. I may not follow, may not even stretch out my right hand in farewell, lamenting my dear mistress. Yet she was like a mother to me, and to all my fellows. She saved us from a thousand ills; for when the anger of our lord was kindled against us, it was her gentleness that softened him, and prevailed. I hate this stranger! Justly I hate him, who has forced himself on our grief!"

And then he ceased. From the big door that he had left ajar came sounds of drunken song; stumbling footsteps were heard; a rough push sent the bronze door swinging open, and the offending guest appeared.

The huge man had certainly not failed to do justice to Admetus' banquet. Hungry and parched with thirst from his day's journey across the Thessalian plain, he had attacked both food and wine with a

hearty appetite. Now he came forward, singing the last verse of his song, laughing and stretching his arms. For a man to drink deeply, after a heavy day, was not thought disgraceful by the Greeks, provided that he had self-control enough not to insult or harm others; and of course Hercules had still no means of knowing how outrageous his revelry was. His wine had made him merry, and eager that those about him should join in his jests and songs; but it had also made him just a little quarrelsome; and when he saw the servant who had slipped away from his feast, he cried out at him in goodnatured reproof:

"Ho, fellow! Why so solemn a look? What art thou thinking of? What troubles thee? It ill befits thy office to scowl at a guest. Be cheerful, man! Am I not thy lord's friend? Yet all the welcome I can win from thee is a harsh, sullen face. Thou mournest, yes! But only for some foreign slave, whose death is nothing to thee. Come hither, my friend, and I will teach thee better wisdom!" He beckoned drunkenly; and when the servant, still resolved to do the duty which Admetus had set him, sulkily approached, the huge man clapped both hands upon his shoulders and laughed in his face. "Dost thou know how the gods dispose all mortal affairs?" he asked. "Thou dost not, I see. How shouldst thou? But I will teach thee. Death is a debt that must be paid by all, soon or late. Nor is there any man living who knows if his life's short span shall be prolonged till tomorrow. For so the fates have willed it—the fates who work in the dark, and whose design no skill of ours shall ever trace or explain. But learn this from me: to bid pleasure welcome while it lasts,

to drink and be merry; to count as thine the life which endures from day to day, and to leave all else to fortune. And chiefly, pray thou to Venus, goddess of love; for she is thy best friend. Of all the gods of heaven she is kindest to men, and sweetest, that gentle queen. Careless, thou mayst let go all other thoughts but the thought of her; and listen to my advice, if it seem good to thee—as I think it does."

The servant, smothering his anger, made no answer to this; and Hercules resumed, taking the other's silence as a sign of assent: "Then bid farewell to grief! Thou dost mourn too deeply. Drink with me! Let not these sorrows of thine overwhelm thee, whatever they may be. Drink, and bind flowers upon thy brow! For I know well, that as the bowl goes round it will wake joy in thy heart, and put to flight this dull and sorry mood that has mastered thee. Drink! We are mortal, thou and I; then let our thoughts be still upon mortal things. And let me tell thee the truth: that to all solemn folk, whose brows are wrinkled with care, life is not life at all, but sickness!"

The servant nodded quietly, still trying to betray no sign of the resentment that burned in his heart. "We know these things" he agreed. "But our present duties are not easily reconciled with feasting and merry-making."

"Why not?" cried Hercules, who still had no reason to doubt the story that Admetus had told him. "She who is dead was but a stranger in the house. Bear up, man! What is her loss to thee? Do not the lords of this fair palace still live? Then, restrain thy sorrow!"

But this was too much for the loyal slave, who could keep silence no longer. With a sudden twist he broke from Hercules' grasp, and stood facing him angrily. "They live, sayest thou? Can it be possible that thou hast not yet guessed the disaster of this house?"

"Unless thy lord hath kept something back from me?" returned Hercules—but quite cheerfully, since he still saw no cause for doubting Admetus' word.

The servant groaned. "Aye, my lord's welcome has been generous to his guest—too generous!" he added bitterly.

But Hercules disagreed: reflecting that though Admetus had bidden him come in, he had himself forborne to join the feast, but had continued his mourning. "How so? He hath shown full respect, I judge, for the death of this stranger."

"Stranger!" The other echoed Hercules's word in a tone full of sorrow. "She was no stranger, let me tell thee; she was one whose death falls most heavily on Admetus's house."

Hercules was staring now; for he was not so drunk that he could miss the passionate despair in the servant's words. "Is there some grief here" he asked anxiously "which Admetus has hidden from me?"

The man hesitated. But he recalled, even now, the orders which Admetus had given him. The guest had had his welcome, he reflected, and had finished his feast; if he were willing to depart now, quietly, before the mourners returned, no more need be said.

"Go on thy way with joy" he muttered at last. "And leave us to share our lord's sorrow."

But he had said too much for Hercules' peace of mind. The hero strode forward suddenly and grasped him by the arm, his eyes searching his face. "What meanest thou? Thy words are not the words of one who bewails the death of a stranger."

"If she had been a stranger" the man replied, "there had been no offence in thy feasting and merry-making."

"Then I am wronged by my kind host" the Strong Man exclaimed, "if he has let me give offence through keeping some secret from me! But what have I done?"

"Thou hast come here at an ill time" the servant informed him bluntly; for he saw that the other would not depart without learning the truth. "This house was not prepared to welcome a guest today. Thou canst see for thyself—our locks are shorn, and we are in mourning robes—"

"Who, then, is dead?" the hero interrupted him. "Not one of his children, surely? Or his old father? He said——"

"He said far less than the truth."

"Who, then?"

"His wife, Alcestis. She is no more."

Hercules stepped back, with a cry of dismay, and for a moment stood there silent, horrified at what he had done. Then in a low voice: "What sayest thou!" he groaned.

"It is true."

"And yet thy master welcomed me into his house, none the less?"

"It would have shamed his noble heart to turn thee away" was the servant's reply.

The huge man trembled. "Poor wretch!" he muttered in despair. "What a wife hast thou lost!"

"We are all lost" the servant answered sadly.

And Hercules cried: "I might have guessed, I might have guessed! When I saw how his eyes were red with weeping, his locks shorn, his face woe-begone! Alas, what have I done? But I was blind, I let thy master persuade me. He said that it was one of foreign birth that he mourned, and was bearing to the grave. So, knowing no better, I entered. I have made merry and feasted in his house. I have recked nothing of the sorrow that has bowed him down. Worse, I have revelled drunkenly, crowning my head with flowers." And then he turned angrily upon the servant, reproaching him: "The fault was thine, too! Why didst thou keep silence? Why didst thou never tell me what a sore disaster had overtaken thy household?"

"My noble master willed it so" the servant replied.

"But tell me" went on Hercules, "where have they buried her? Where shall I find her tomb?"

"Outside the city, by the road that leads to Larissa" was the answer. "They have taken her there, and there shalt thou still find her."

For a few moments Hercules remained silent, his great head sunk on his breast in sorrowful thought. He had committed one of the most grievous faults

that any Greek could commit; he had intruded on the cruellest trouble of his friend, and had insulted the dead queen by revelling in her house. He should have guessed...... It made no difference, in any case, that he had done these things in ignorance. The law of host and guest, so nobly kept by Admetus, had been foully broken by him. His one thought was now to make amends, if possible, for the wrong he had inflicted. But how could he make amends?

And suddenly, as he pondered, an idea came to him. He had done wondrous exploits in time past—such deeds as no man before him had even attempted. What availed his mighty strength, his courage, his great name, if they could not now be employed in helping his friend? He began speaking, not so much to the attendant as to himself:

"Courage now, my heart! Now is the time for thee to show what a son my mother Alcmena bore to Zeus himself. If I might save this lady, so lately dead—that were a proud task to accomplish. A grateful tribute to my old friend Admetus, if I could only bring back to his house the lost Alcestis! I will go down and watch for the dark Messenger, whom I think I shall find if I make haste, drinking the funeral-offerings that are set out for him at her tomb. And if I lie in wait for him, if I rush out on him from ambush, my arms shall seize and hold him till his ribs crack, and his lungs gasp for breath. I will not let him go, nor shall god or man save him from my close grip, till he releases his prey. But if I fail to find him there: if he neglects to come and taste the offerings of blood poured out—then I must even follow him below the world, to the black realm of Pluto and

Pluto's queen where the sun never shines, and beg or compel her thence. So shall I lead her home again, and restore her to my friend's arms, whose kind heart received me here in his house so nobly, and who made no excuse to turn me away, for all the grief that oppressed him. It was a kingly act of his to hide the sad news from me: a wondrous proof of his friendship! Who else in all Thessaly would have shown such reverence to a guest? Who else, throughout all the kingdoms of Greece? Never shall it be said that a man so generous found me worthless and base!"

So saying, the hero once more shouldered his club; and without further words to the slave who stood by, he hastened down the steps and set out through the winding streets towards the gate of the city. The servant watched him go—softened a little in his wrath by the repentance which the strange guest had shown, and marvelling afresh at his mighty sinews as he strode swiftly away.

CHAPTER X

After a little while, the funeral procession came in sight again, silent now, and following Admetus on his way home to his stricken house. But at the sight of his home, so bereft, Admetus' sorrow seemed to break out anew, and a cry of anguish escaped him.

"Alas, alas!" he groaned. "How hateful is this sad journey! How hateful this return to my widowed house! Alas, where shall I go, where shall I rest? What shall I say, or what leave unsaid? I sink and faint beneath the burden of this woe that is over me.

Wretched am I, a man born to misery. I envy her whom I have lost! I long for her, I long to lay me down and rest in the tomb that covers her! No more with any joy shall I see the light of the sun, no more with any joy walk the face of the earth! So dear a prize has fate snatched from me, to carry off and render up as victim to the King of the Dead!"

"On, on! Poor wounded one, seek shelter in thy house" the old men gently counselled him.

"Alas!"

"Aye, alas! Thy grief may well wring such groans from thee!"

"Ah, misery!"

"Thou dost go forward in sorrow, well we know! Yet what avail thy tears, to bring back the dead?"

"O, wretched man that I am!"

"Wretched indeed, no more to see the dear face of thy wife" they wept with him.

And Admetus cried out afresh: "You speak of that which man's soul finds hardest to bear! What greater sorrow can befall, than for a man to lose the one who is nearest his heart? O, that I never had taken her to wife! That I had never dwelt with her here! I envy all those who have never wedded: and most of all I envy the childless man. He who is single has to mourn no grief that cannot easily be endured. But to see children stricken by disease, to see their mother torn away by death's cruel hand—this is a grief too hard for a man to bear, when he reflects that he might have passed his life unwedded and childless!"

"Fate comes to all" the old men reminded him. "Man has no power to resist."

"Alas, alas!"

"But wilt thou set no bounds to thy bitter mourning?" they urged. "Thou hast indeed a heavy weight to bear; yet it must be borne. Men have lost wives before thee; thou art not the first nor the last. Sorrow lies in wait to seize us all, though it takes different forms in striking this man or that."

"There is no sorrow that endures like sorrow for those who are dead" was Admetus' answer. And then he turned on them bitterly, reproaching them because they had prevented him when he wished to take his own life at Alcestis' grave. "Why did you hinder me? I would have thrown myself into the tomb —the tomb that gaped for her. I would have lain down with her in death, the dearest and best of wives. And so, instead of one, King Pluto should have had two most faithful spirits, crossing his dark river hand in hand."

"I had a dear friend once" an old man told him, "a kinsman of mine, whose son died young: his only son, and one who deserved his tears. Yet he, though left childless, bore that bitter loss with manly courage, till the years swiftly passing brought him soon to old age."

But Admetus was still too broken with grief to take any comfort from hearing of the sorrows of others. He had now climbed the steps and gained the door of the palace; and once more, the thought of the empty rooms beyond filled him with despair. "O home, that once seemed so fair to me! How shall I now bear to return to thee? How shall I live beneath thy roof, now that my happiness is no more?" And then there came into his mind the memory of his

wedding, and of how he had brought Alcestis here in days gone by. "Alas, how times have changed, since I came proudly through the streets to enter these doors, leading Alcestis by the hand! Pine-torches from Mount Pelion were blazing then, and the nuptial hymns were sung, on the night of our wedding. With many a joyous cry she was hailed, that night, by the festal crowd. And now she lies dead. 'A happy marriage!' they cried; for we were born of noble blood, she and I. But now, instead of wedding-hymns, the voice of weeping is heard. Instead of splendid-coloured robes, the black dress of mourners follows me to my home, where there is naught awaiting me but sorrow and loneliness."

"This sorrow struck thee down in the midst of thy happiness, when as yet thou hadst known nothing but success" the old citizens murmured. "Yet think, thy own life has been spared. True, thy dear wife is dead, and has passed from thy love. But men have suffered a like sorrow ere this. Many and many a wife has death torn from her grieving husband."

But the king only answered—calmer now, as with a settled despair: "My friends, I count my wife's lot to be happier than mine, though it seem otherwise. For never again shall sorrow wring her heart, as it wrings mine now; she is at rest from all the host of ills that assault mankind, she has won glory for ever. But I, who have lived past the hour that destiny decreed for me, and should have died in her stead—I must drag out my life to its bitter end; for though grief has come late to me, it has come in full measure." And once more, as he turned towards the portals of his home, Admetus shrank back from entering.

"I cannot bear to go in! To whom shall I speak, in there? Whose welcome can bring me any joy henceforward? What shall I find to do? Lonely and sorrowful I shall waste and grow old, missing her wherever I turn my eyes—whether towards my empty bed: or the chair, once hers, but now empty likewise: or the rooms, fair no longer, since her beauty is gone from them. My children cling to me, and weep for the mother they have lost, my very slaves lament their kind mistress. And if, within, my eyes find nothing but misery, what comfort shall they find outside? The weddings of my young men? The happy faces of their wives in the streets? Such sights will serve only to increase my grief. Hardly shall I endure the presence of those, who were once her friends."

And then, perhaps because old Pheres' bitter taunts had taken root in his mind, Admetus too late began to realise that the loss of Alcestis had been his own free choice: which hurt him most cruelly of all. "If anyone hates me, he will now mock and say: 'See him, who lives on like a coward, who dared not to die! His soul was little and mean. A man, he calls himself; yet he shirked death by yielding up his wife in his stead. He hates his parents for refusing to die; yet he himself dared not, his heart was too faint!' Ah, this ill name will ever cleave to me! Why then should I wish to live, the prey of malice and misfortune?"

He ceased, and sank down against the pillars at the head of the stair, senseless with grief. And presently the old men began their dirge afresh, chanting now to the awful and unknown power, which the Greeks called Fate: the power of Things That Must

Befall, which they believed was stronger than the gods themselves, stronger even than Zeus. But first they sang how they had worshipped the Muses--the nine sisters, goddesses of the Arts, who with Apollo as their leader and friend had revealed many of those mysteries that gladden and help mankind: the secrets of music and of painting, and above all of healing herbs and roots to save men from illness and from death.

"We have explored their sacred groves" they sang, "and have been taught their wisdom. Yet never, for all our search, have we been able to discover aught so resistless as Fate. We know no herb of power enough to withstand Fate, when Fate turns against us: not one, of all those herbs whose virtues Orpheus found and wrote in old books of Thrace: not one, of all those given by Apollo himself to the sons of Asclepius. Apollo knew, and taught to them, what remedies best soothe man's pain and heal man's wounds when various ills assault him. But against cruel Fate he could devise no remedy."

And the second chorus went on: "Men pray to all the other gods; but to Fate alone, they dare not. Fate has no sacred image; to Fate men have built no shrine. For they know well, that though they sacrificed on altars to Fate, the victims' blood would be shed in vain. Fate scorns to hear their prayers. Ah, dreadful goddess, never mayst thou appear to me, nor face me with the grim commands with which thou hast wrecked the peace of men in times past! Thou, thou art the enforcer of the sternest decrees of Zeus! Thy strength tames even the wild savages of the north,

in their armour of steel. Thy hard heart knows no pity, nor ever shall!"

And the first chorus, their eyes fixed on the crouching form of the king, took up the dirge of terror: "And now, O king, she turns against thyself her hands that love to wreak disaster. She hath bound thee in chains of iron. And thou must needs endure! For all thy tears shall not recall the dead from the dark country of Night, nor bring her back again to the sweet light of the sun. Nor can thy virtue avail—just though thou art, and like a god in thy kingship—to save thee from the doom that none can resist. Fate has claimed others, before her: heroes and mighty men, the very sons of the gods! They have gone down into the dark, at Fate's grim command. And now her turn has come—the turn of one most dear to us while she still gladdened our eyes: most dear still, now that she has gone her way to the dark realm of the dead: most faithful and best of wives!"

"No common, worthless grave shall Alcestis have!" they sang. "Think not that it shall ever be as those poor mounds, that cover the less blessed dead. Nay! Let men honour it as some high shrine, the holy place of a god. So shall the traveller, passing by, turn aside from his path to gaze on that shrine with reverence, and beat his breast, and sigh: 'She died here, long ago, to save her lord. Blessed is she, even among the dead. Hail, sacred lady! Grant us thy help still!' So shall men praise her and entreat her grace, pausing there."

The dirge ended. Silence fell. Admetus still lay prostrate where he had sunk down, at the head of the stairs. Then one of the old men, chancing to turn

towards the town, called the attention of the rest with a low cry of surprise. A well-known figure was climbing the hill towards them. They recognised him at a glance, far off though he was. It was the hero Hercules, returning to the palace: and by his side a woman, closely veiled, whom he led by the hand.

CHAPTER XI

Silent and wondering, the old men watched the hero's approach, with dismay in their eyes. They had thought he was gone. Surely he had not come again, knowing what he knew, to demand a second welcome? While they stood hushed, awaiting him, one of the servants touched the shoulder of the king and whispered in his ear. And then Admetus, noble-hearted still in spite of his grief, rose slowly and stretched out his hands. The old men looked at each other doubtfully. Had the huge man returned to tell his friend he was sorry? Yet when Hercules broke silence, his first words seemed rather like a reproach.

"I must speak freely to thee, as a friend, Admetus, nor hide from thee a certain matter in which thou hast been to blame. I came to thee at an illtime; and I thought thou hadst reason to believe me thy friend. Yet thou didst not reveal to me, that it was thy wife who was dead; thou didst receive me in thy house, making me believe that thou didst mourn for a stranger only. So I put garlands on my head, and made merry with wine, little knowing that I was feasting in the presence of so sore a grief. I blame thee! Yes, thou didst ill to deceive me so!"

But the king answered not a word. And Hercules resumed:

"Yet I have not come here again to add to thy unhappiness. I will tell thee in brief what has brought me back." He pointed now to the veiled figure, dressed like a captive slave, who stood silent by him. "I come to ask thee to receive this woman from my hands, and to take care of her till I return. For I must go my way to Thrace, to kill the Bistonian king and bring back his fierce horses. If I fail—but I pray that I may not fail, for my heart longs to revisit thee—if I fail, then I must leave her with thee. Guard her well, Admetus; for with much labour I won her!" And forthwith, as the king still stood dumb at such a request, the hero began to tell how the captive woman had come into his possession. "On my way hence, I chanced upon some public games, and found that any stranger might take part in them if he dared. This woman was the prize of victory. There were lesser prizes too—a horse, for each victor in the easier contests: in the more hard, the winners were to be rewarded with cattle from the herd, and with slaves such as this. I conquered; nor was I so poor-spirited as to ignore such a prize as I had won. Take her, then; keep her safe for me. For she was won by no mean theft, but after a hard-fought fight! Some day, perhaps, thou wilt live to thank me."

Admetus answered at last. "Think not that I did not treasure thy friendship, Hercules, nor that I doubted the nobility of thy heart, when I hid from thee the unhappy doom of Alcestis. I only feared lest thou shouldst go thy way, and seek a welcome elsewhere. Hadst thou done so, I should have added to

the sum of the griefs I bear; and I have ills enough of my own to mourn, without bringing trouble to thee. As for this woman—I beg thee, old friend, if thou canst, leave her in the protection of some other household of Thessaly, whose master has not my reason to mourn. Thou hast good friends here in Pherae, hast thou not, besides me? Then do not leave her here, to remind me of my loss! For I could never see her moving about my house, but my tears would flow anew. Add not another burden to those I bear; their weight is grievous enough! And indeed, how should I protect that young girl, as her dress shows her to be? How shall I guard her honour, if she dwells here among the young men of my household? It is not easy to control the rash passions of youth; I should not be thy friend, if I should fail to give thee this warning. Or, if I keep her separate from them, by receiving her into the rooms that were lately my wife's, what then? Am I to accept her in the place of Alcestis? By the gods, that cannot be! By so doing, I should earn a double blame; my folk would despise my faithlessness, if I forgot the best of wives, who died for me, and took a fresh bride to my bed; and further, I should be most base, if I neglected the high honour which I owe to the dead." Then, his eyes turning towards the close-veiled woman who stood silent by, he went on: "Know, lady, whoever thou art, that thou remindest me too bitterly of the dear one I have lost. Thy height, thy form, thy walk—they are those of Alcestis—!" And suddenly he burst out, in terrible despair: "By heaven, take her away! I cannot look on her! It is too much to ask of me, I cannot bear it! When I see her, it is as though

I saw my dear one standing by me again! It wounds me to the heart, it calls forth fresh tears from my eyes! This is the bitterest of all grief! O, take her away!"

The old men nodded assent. They, too, thought Hercules was asking far too much of his friend, and deeply blamed him; but they had no wish to begin fresh arguments; rather, they sought to comfort the king in his trouble. "Unhappy is thy fate, we know" they murmured gently. "Yet must one bear with courage what the gods choose to send."

Hercules joined in quietly. "I would that the gods might grant me power" he said "to bring thy wife again from the land of Death to the fair light of the sun! So gladly would I exert such a power, to help thee."

"I know it well" Admetus sighed. "Thou wast ever my good friend. But alas, there is no such power, nor can ever be. For the dead pass from us, and come not again."

"Then there is nothing thou canst do" replied Hercules slowly "but to restrain the surging tide of thy grief. Be calm, take courage."

Sadly, Admetus shook his head. "Aye, that is easy to advise" he said. "Less easy to obey!"

"But to go on lamenting to the end of thy days will bring thee no reward" Hercules reasoned with him.

"I know it" Admetus said. "But I am in love with grief."

"To love the dead too much" the other warned him "will call forth tears that never end."

"How can I help my tears! I am more wretched than I can tell thee."

"Aye, thou hast lost a noble wife. No man will deny it!"

"Nevermore can my life be happy, as in old days."

"Thou sayest that" persisted Hercules "because thy grief is yet new. But time will teach thee to forget—"

"Time!" interrupted the king bitterly. "Aye, the day that shall bring my death!"

"No, no! The day that brings thee some young fair bride. She will end thy sorrow!"

But Admetus would listen to no such comfort, even from his old friend, and broke in with a harsh denial: "Cease, cease! What a thing hast thou said! Nevermore could I think of marriage."

"Wilt thou then spend the empty years alone, and widowed?"

"I shall never wed another bride" Admetus assured him again.

"And dost thou think that this will profit the dead?"

But the king answered, nobly: "I owe this honour to my dear Alcestis, wheresoever she may be!"

And Hercules fell silent for a moment. He had been trying to prolong their talk, full of the secret news with which he meant presently to gladden his friend; but he had no reply to make to the nobility of the king's last answer. "I cannot but praise such words" he muttered, half to himself; "though I fear lest thy sorrow is driving thee mad!"

"Praise me or not, as thou thinkest best" Admetus said. "I will never marry again."

"I praise thee for thy dear faith to her who is gone" the hero admitted gently.

"May I die, if I so betray her memory" Admetus went on, "dead though she be!"

Hercules shrugged his shoulders. "Well, give this lady shelter, at least" he begged. But the other still refused.

"No! I entreat thee not to ask it, by thy father Zeus."

"Thou wilt do her great wrong, in refusing" Hercules said.

"Yet to accept her would break my heart" was Admetus' reply.

Hercules still urged him. "Let me persuade thee, Admetus. Believe me, so kind a deed will find its reward."

"By heaven, I could wish that thou hadst never won her" his friend groaned.

"Yet thou thyself hast a share in my victory."

"It is noble of thee to say so. Yet let her go, let her go!"

And at last, Hercules seemed about to give in. "If she must go, she shall" he said. "But dost thou insist?"

"Yes indeed—if thou wilt not be too angered by my refusal."

"I have good reason to keep on asking thee" Hercules still pressed him.

And it was King Admetus, after all, who yielded: not that he wished to do so, but because the old laws of host and guest seemed to leave him no way of denying his friend's urgent entreaty. "Have thy way, then" he sighed, very heavily. "It is no wish of mine; but I may not refuse thee."

"The day will come when thou shalt thank me for this gift that I bring" cried Hercules, grasping the king's hands.

Admetus motioned to his slaves. "Lead her in" he commanded, and turned towards the house. But at once, Hercules called out:

"What! Wilt thou entrust her to slaves? Such a thing must not be!"

"Then bring her in thyself, if thou dost prefer" the king said.

"I will not part with her" the hero swore "except to thine own hands."

"No, no! I will not touch her. She has my leave to enter. That is enough!"

"I will entrust her only to thyself, Admetus" persisted Hercules.

And once more, in his noble patience, Admetus agreed. "Thou dost enforce me, sorely against my will" he sighed, and turned towards where the woman was standing; but he still could not bring himself to take her by the hand.

"Stretch out thy hands, and touch her" Hercules begged him.

Admetus bowed his head. "I touch her, as I would touch some hideous monster" he groaned, closing his eyes.

"Hast thou her hand?"

"I have."

Hercules stepped back. "Then hold her fast!" he answered, with a great shout of triumph. "And say, hereafter, that the son of Zeus has not failed to repay thy kindness. Look her in the face, Admetus! See if she bears some likeness to thy dear lost one. Rejoice! For the time has come for thee to bid farewell to thy grief!"

With a swift movement, he had plucked the long veil from the woman's face; and there, alive and radiant, but still silent, stood the queen Alcestis!

The old men gave a shout of astonishment. Admetus' head was still bowed; but at that sound from the old men he raised his eyes; and as he recognised his dear Alcestis standing in front of him, a wild cry of joy and amazement burst from his lips. Even so, however, he did not yet clasp her in his arms; before, he had forborne because he thought she was a stranger, and hated her; but now, because he dared not yet trust his good fortune, and feared that she was a ghost.

"O ye gods!" he gasped, faintly. "What am I to think? A miracle, beyond hope! Is it indeed my wife I see, or is some god mocking me?

"Thou seest thy wife, in very truth" smiled the strong man.

"A ghost! Ah, beware lest it be no more than a ghost!" cried Admetus, almost beside himself. But Hercules laughed outright.

"Dost think thy old friend a wizard then, who can call up departed spirits?"

"But—but—Alcestis···—I buried her!" stammered the king.

"I wonder not that thou art hard to convince" his friend nodded.

Admetus still held her by the hand; but even now, he had not yet ventured to embrace her. "I touch her—" he murmured, in a voice full of awe. "May I speak to her, as I would to the living?

"Why, yes! Thou hast recovered thy heart's desire!"

And then at last, the king drew her into his arms. "O, dearest of women, then it is thyself that I see! This is past all my wildest hopes. I never dreamed that I should see thee any more!"

"Thou hast her, none the less" Hercules assured him; and then, in accordance with the Greek belief that to be too happy is dangerous, he added a prayer: "And may no god envy thee thy good fortune!"

King Admetus turned to Hercules now, and there were tears of joy in his eyes. "O, blessed be thou, most noble son of Zeus! And may thy father's strength protect thee! For it is thou, I think, and thou alone, that hast brought her back. But how? How didst thou win her back into the sunlight, from the land of the dead?"

It was a question which he might well ask; for the strong man had not achieved his prize without a terrific struggle, in which he had challenged and wrestled with the Messenger himself, till he overthrew him. But the hero was too much occupied with his old friend's joy, to boast of his own exploit. And

he replied, quite simply: "I fought with him, who holds the spirits of the dead in his power."

"Thou didst fight Death's own messenger? Where?

"I lay in wait for him, and seized him at the tomb when he came to claim her."

They all stared at Hercules, as they pressed round him in amazement. It was too strange and wonderful, as yet, for them to understand. Meanwhile Alcestis still stood silent. At last, Admetus asked: "But why does she stay thus speechless?"

"It is not yet allowed that thou shalt hear her voice" Hercules explained. "She has been dedicated to the gods of the underworld; nor is she yet free of their spell, till sacred rites have been performed and the third morning comes. But lead her in. And, as thou hast already shown thyself a just man, see that thou still continue to reverence strangers." By which words he meant, that the return of Alcestis was Admetus' reward for his noble treatment of a guest: and that in future he must still observe that most sacred law of the Greeks. And then the hero took his leave. "Farewell!" he said. "I must go on my way. For I have yet to carry out the labour that King Eurystheus has laid on me."

"Stay with me!" Admetus cried. "And share the home of the friend!"

"I will return some day," the hero promised. "But now I must hasten away."

And when he found that Hercules could not be persuaded, Admetus had to consent, and gave him his blessing. "May victory attend thee, then, and bring

thee safe back to us! He turned towards the old men. "Go quickly, and proclaim this joyous news to my folk! Bid the chief men to celebrate this happy event with feasting and dancing. Let sacrifice be made, and let the altars send up their rich incense to heaven, that we may pay the gods the gratitude which is their due! For a new life begins for me today, and I will praise the gods who have so blessed me. Go!"

The strong man had already left them, striding away towards the north with his huge club on his back. The slaves, with shouts of joy, flung open the big bronze doors. Admetus led his wife within, his arm laid tenderly across her shoulders, as the cheers rang out. And the old men began to scatter through the streets bearing their glad news.

"Most strangely" they told each other "do the gods divide their gifts! Now showering on us such a wealth of blessings as we dared not expect, now checking evils which we had not hoped to avoid! So has their power been shown, on this happy day: so have they turned the bitterness of our despair into joy!"

They parted, full of wonder and awe. Up in the palace, silent still, sat Queen Alcestis with her lord. While Hercules, alone and laughing a little to himself, strode away valiantly towards the Thracian hills.

THE CYCLOPS

CHAPTER I

You may have felt, reading the story of Alcestis, that it was really a very gloomy one, despite the fact that the lady was restored to life at the end ; and you may have decided that, fine though that tragedy is, you would not care to read too many Greek tragedies one after another, without something lighter in between them.

Well, that is quite a natural point of view; though indeed, the Alcestis story with its happy ending is lighter than most Greek tragedies, which ended usually in the hero's destruction. It was the custom of the Greeks of the fifth century B. C., at the great festivals during which their plays were acted, to attend three tragedies in succession; they did not find them tedious, nor too gloomy to be enjoyed; and in any case, their visits to the theatre were not regarded as mere entertainment, but were a part of a religious festival in honour of the god Dionysus. However, three successive tragedies were considered quite enough, even by them; and it was usual to follow such a "trilogy" (as the triple group was called) by a fourth play, quite short and merry—a comedy, in fact.

"The Cyclops," whose story we are going to read, was such a comedy—the only one whose text has

been handed down to us. It is about a one-eyed giant, who ate men; but before turning to it, we should know something of its place in the theatre, and of its connection with Dionysus, in whose honour it was acted.

Dionysus, or Bacchus as he is also called, was a nature-god; he was connected with the life of things that grow in the earth: with the mysterious rebirth, each spring, of the dead seed that had been buried underground: with the idea of resurrection: and in particular, with the cult of the vine and with wine-making. So the Greeks thought it fitting that, whatever might be the theme of the trilogy, the final comedy should deal directly in some way with the story of Dionysus himself.

What had this giant to do with Dionysus, then? Nothing at all; except that in the story of this play, he had enslaved some of the followers of Dionysus, called Satyrs, and was making them work for him against their will in the island where he dwelt. So that the giant's final overthrow could be regarded as a victory for Dionysus himself. Now we may go on to the actual play, and see how the Satyrs came to be serving the giant.

This is explained at once, as soon as the comedy begins, by an old fellow called Silenus who is the Satyrs' leader. He comes forward—wearily, for he is getting on in years, and the giant is a hard master; though, as we shall soon see, the old Silenus is still merry enough when he gets the chance. But just now, he is complaining bitterly how different his present life is, from the days when the Satyrs were at liberty to follow their lord Dionysus. They had worked hard

enough, he says, to serve Dionysus himself; but at least they enjoyed serving him. Now they are slaves of one whom they both despise and hate. He speaks first of the old days: "O Dionysus, what toils I have endured for your sake, both now and before my limbs began to weaken with age! For first I served you when you fled away from the mountain-nymphs who reared you, driven frantic as you were by the madness which Zeus' queen sent on you. Then later, in the fight with the sons of Earth, I stood firm by your side—"

The fight of which Silenus spoke was a great battle waged by Zeus and the gods against the Giants, Earth's sons, who rebelled against Zeus' rule. You have heard something of that famous battle already—how Zeus hurled back the fierce assault of the Giants, and piled three mountains on them, and made them toil for him henceforward, far underground, forging the thunderbolts for Zeus to hurl at any other foes who opposed him. Among the gods who helped Zeus on that great day, Dionysus was prominent; and the Satyrs had fought at his side.

"I stood firm by you, shoulder to shoulder" old Silenus went on. "I did you good service then; for I attacked the huge giant Enceladus, and drove my spear through his shield. Is all that story a dream? Indeed, it is not! For you still have the spoils which you won on that day. But as for me, I suffer harder things now than I ever suffered—" And he began recalling how his loyalty to Dionysus had at last brought him to his present wretched plight.

"For when I heard how your old foe, the goddess Hera, wife of Zeus, had sent you on a hard journey,

I gathered all my children together, and took ship, and set out to follow you. I myself stood up on the deck, and helped raise the mast; while my sons leaned upon the oars, and with their sturdy strokes lashed the purple sea into foam, in their quest for you."

But soon, disaster had come. "We were sailing by Malea" the old man resumed, "when a wild storm arose out of the east, and drove us helpless on to these cruel rocks that lie below Mount Etna. The island, as we found to our bitter cost, was peopled by giants—one-eyed monsters, children of the God of the Sea; savage cannibals, who live among the lonely caves of this rocky shore. One of them, Polyphemus, found us and caught us here, and has made us his slaves. Alas, no more do we enjoy your service, Dionysus! No more do we dance and sing for you, as in old days! Instead, we have to tend the flocks of this lawless giant, which he pastures in the mountains. My sons are out with the sheep now; for they are young and strong, and can carry out a shepherd's work on the steep slopes of the hills. But I must stay here, near the Cyclops' cave, filling his water-butts, or sweeping the rocky floor: or, worst of all, getting ready some loathsome and godless meal for my terrible master—"

As he spoke, the old fellow picked up a great iron rake, and went on with his work again. "I am weary of it, weary of it! But I must scrape up all the litter of his cave with this rake, and make the place neat and clean before he returns with the sheep at evening."

A sound of distant shouting now reached his ears. He stared out towards the hills, whence his

sons were already returning, driving the flocks in front of them. Silenus gave them a hail; but he was almost angry with them when he saw how, even here in slavery, they could still dance and sing as boisterously as though they were free. "What's this, what's this?" he shouted harshly. "Can you still leap about as in old days, when with your songs and dances you escorted your young lord Dionysus?"

The Satyrs arrived. They were a strange crowd, certainly—lively and still untamed. It was easy to see whose sons they were; for in their bodies, as well as in a certain shaggy wildness, they resembled old Silenus himself. Down to the waist, they were like men; but they had goats' hind-legs, and hoofs, and little tufted tails; and even their human heads had each a pair of little horns, just showing through the matted hair. Now they rushed towards the cave—yelling, leaping, singing, while the sheep stampeded before them. Their song was a sort of wild chant, hurled at the flocks; half of the crowd would sing one verse, and then the other half replied. This was how the chant ran:

"Where has he wandered, the old noble ram? Has he strayed away among the rocks? The air here is calm and clear for him, the king of the herd! Here is soft sweet grass, and water too; for the streams from the mountains meet by the cave in a trough, and they are pure and bright as they first broke from the ground! What, not here? Nor feeding among the dew of green slopes up yonder? Ah, there he goes! On, on! Or I'll throw a stone at you, to mend your manners! Get on, you and your horns! You wild thing, you wanderer! Will you never obey?"

The old ram was headed off, and driven towards the cave. Meanwhile the other Satyrs had burst into the second verse of the song. It was more plaintive now, as they remembered how they had lost their dear master, the god, and must serve the cruel Cyclops. It began as a hymn to Aphrodite, the goddess of love:

"I will sing Bacchus' song to Aphrodite, the golden one! I sang it in days gone by, when I sought Aphrodite and her joys, with the nymphs whose white feet went dancing in time to my song. O Dionysus! O beloved one! Where do you wander now, alone, far from us your friends, with your fair hair blown about you? Lo, we your servants, who should be with you, must slave in misery for this one-eye brute, clad in these goat-skins which are all he gives us, wretched, and far from your joy!"

The voice of old Silenus broke in on them at this moment, urgent and harsh. "Be silent, my sons" he ordered. "Round up your flocks—make haste! Then herd them into the rocky cave!"

The Satyrs did so. But the sharp urgency which they had noticed in their father's tone made them curious; and before long, when the giant's flocks were safely penned in the cave, they came skipping and leaping back to where they had left Silenus. They found him standing rigid, one hand holding the rake, the other shading his eyes as he stared out to sea. "What is it, father?" they cried. "Why such haste this evening?"

Silenus pointed. "A ship!" he exclaimed. "And a Greek ship, by the look of her! Round the point

yonder she came coasting, as you returned from the hills."

The Satyrs all turned seawards, leaping and jostling each other as their eyes searched the horizon. "We see no ship" they cried.

"No, she has run inshore now, beyond those rocks, where the sand begins. Her rowers must be landing here And if they are Greeks—!" He broke off; and his wild sons were silent too, as they took in this news. For the giant's island, Sicily, was many a long league from Greece; few Greek ships ever passed that way, and none had ever come ashore unless they were wrecked. For the cruel rocky coast, and a glimpse of the Cyclops himself, perhaps, striding over the distant hills, were enough to frighten even the bravest sailors away. Yet the poor Satyrs, who were Greeks themselves, had never ceased to hope that some day a Greek crew might land on their coast, and help them to escape from their brutal master. Silent and eager, they all stared down towards the rocks that screened the little sandy bay, waiting.

And presently, sure enough, some figures began to appear in twos and threes round the side of the rocks, making their way inland. Between them they were carrying the big bottles, made of skin, which the Greeks used for storing wine or water. And as they approached, the Satyrs could see that they looked worn-out and hungry.

"Poor, luckless strangers!" old Silenus sighed. "They must have come from far, or be in wretched plight, since they dare land here! They cannot have heard who our cruel master is, or they would never

hope to find a welcome from *him*—from Polyphemus, the hater of strangers, the devourer of men! Keep silent, my sons, till I ask who they are, and whence they have come to the savage cliffs of Etna."

The sailors were close below them now, with their captain in front. He was a thick-set little man, of middle age, with wise eyes and the look of one who had suffered great hardships. But he stepped forward sturdily, and hailed the Satyrs cheerfully enough: as though his merry spirit and his courage were still unbroken, despite all the troubles he had gone through.

"Ho, friends! Can you show me where there is a spring of fresh water, that we may quench our thirst? The water-butts on our ship are all empty, and we lack food besides; can we obtain it here?"

The captain had begun to speak, or rather to shout his message, when the two groups were still some distance apart. But he stopped suddenly, as he drew near enough to see what sort of folk he was addressing. He at once recognised them for Satyrs; for as Silenus had guessed, he was a Greek; and the tradition of Dionysus and his queer-looking followers was well known to all Greeks. Still, he was not a little surprised to find himself in the actual presence of such fairy-folk, for the first time: especially as he was now so far from home, and from any lands where he might have expected to find Dionysus worshipped.

Yet he was not at all dismayed. Quite the contrary! For since Dionysus was a god of the Greeks, the captain had all the better reason to hope that he would find a welcome. So he went on, when

he had recovered from his surprise, in high good-spirits: "But what is this! We seem to have chanced on some happy gathering of Dionysus' own folk! For I see these are Satyrs, making merry by their cave. Let me first greet their leader—" And he advanced towards Silenus, holding out his hands. "Hail, old sir!" he cried.

"Hail to you, stranger!" old Silenus answered. "Tell us your country, and your race."

"I am Ulysses, king of Ithaca" was the captain's reply.

CHAPTER II

The Satyrs stared at him, and then at one another; for the name of Ulysses was far-famed, wherever the Greek tongue was spoken.

When the Greek heroes, Agamemnon and Menelaus, set out to make war against Troy, they had called together a great host from all the scattered kingdoms of Greece, to help them. From north, and south, and east and west the allies had been collected—from Thrace and Thessaly, of which you have lately read: from Athens and central Greece: from Argos and Tiryns, the country of Hercules: from the islands of the Aegean Sea. Ulysses himself ruled Ithaca, a rocky island far away to the west; he had not greatly wished, at first, to join the assault on Troy; for Troy was a long way from his home, and it would make little difference to the Ithacans whether the Greeks sacked it or not.

But in the end the Greeks had persuaded Ulysses to join them. He was famous, even then, for his wisdom and cunning ; and they felt that their plans would be more likely to succeed, with Ulysses in their council.

It was now ten or fifteen years since the war against Troy had started. Ulysses' wisdom and cunning plans had served the Greeks well ; for the famous Wooden Horse, by means of which Troy was taken at last, had been his invention. The city of Troy was sacked, and her heroes put to the sword. After which, the Greek leaders had begun to disperse, each with his share of the spoils, and to set out for their homes again. Ulysses' own return was one of the most difficult, since he lived so far away ; it cost him another ten years, after the fall of Troy ; and he was on his homeward journey now, when fierce storms had driven him far to the west, and cast him up on the island of Sicily, where the Cyclops and Satyrs lived.

The latter, being Greeks by race, were already familiar with the news of the Trojan War, and with the renown of Ulysses. So you may easily imagine how interested they were, when the stranger announced his name.

"I know you, then! cried Silenus. "You are Sisyphus' son—the man of cunning, the great talker!"

Ulysses looked at him sharply, for he suspected the old man to be laughing at him. And so indeed Silenus was; for it was known that Ulysses owed much of his success to his persuasive tongue. "I am he" he said. "But there is no need for you to quarrel with me over that!"

Silenus had no intention of quarrelling, however. He was too interested in hearing Ulysses' adventures.

"How come you to Sicily?" he asked; for he knew that Ulysses must have strayed far out of his way.

"I come from Troy" the hero answered. "From the hardships of the Trojan war."

"But your home is far behind you. How was it that you did not put in there?"

"By no wish of mine!" Ulysses exclaimed. "Fierce tempests have driven me here into the west, whether I would or no."

Silenus laughed. "Why, that is just what happened to us!" he cried.

"Then, you were shipwrecked too?" Ulysses enquired. He had suffered more than any man alive, perhaps, from the accidents of travel and bad weather, and he perceived at once that he might claim the sympathy of the Satyrs, as a sharer in like misfortunes. "What voyage was yours" he asked, "when such disaster overtook you?"

Silenus began to explain. "Our leader Dionysus was driven to make a sea-voyage, by the anger of Zeus' wife. He fell in with pirates, and fought with them at sea. When we heard they had captured him, we Satyrs set out to the rescue; for we are his friends, as you know. But we had no better fortune than the god himself, being shipwrecked here—"

"Where?" Ulysses interrupted. He had listened to Silenus, for politeness' sake; but what he really wanted was to find out where he had landed, and what hope he might have of getting help. "What land is this? Who lives here?"

Silenus pointed. "That mountain towering over us is Etna, the highest peak of Sicily."

"Are there walled towns," asked Ulysses, staring about him, "with towers to protect them against assault?" He had already suffered so much, from the savage folk of lands where he had been cast up, that his first thought was to enquire the strength of this new country, and the dangers that might lurk here.

Silenus shook his head. "There are no towns" he declared. "Nor do any men inhabit these lonely rocks."

This seemed to Ulysses the best possible news—provided only that his men could find something to eat. "Who owns the island, then?" he pursued. "Only the race of beasts?"

"Giants, called Cyclops" the Satyr informed him. "But they possess no houses. They live in the caves."

"Who is their king?" was the next question which Ulysses put. "Or is their state a republic, governing itself?"

But Silenus only laughed. "They are shepherds" he said. "And no one obeys anyone in anything!"

Ulysses' mind still ran on the problem of finding food. "On what do they live?" he asked. "Do they serve Ceres, goddess of the harvest, sowing corn?"

"No, they sow nothing. They live on milk and cheese, and their meat is the flesh of the sheep which they pasture on these hills" the old Satyr informed him.

"Milk!" Ulysses exclaimed scornfully; for the Greek tribes all grew the vine, and thought that people who drank no wine were very barbarous. "Have

they never heard of Dionysus' gift, then? Are vineyards not known here?"

Silenus sighed deeply. "Alas, no! For the Cyclops are a savage folk!"

"And are they kind to strangers?" asked Ulysses, somewhat anxiously; he hardly knew what to expect from so outlandish a race. "Do they respect the sacred laws that bid men be just to their guests?"

"They think" said Silenus grimly "that the best thing a stranger brings is——his own flesh!"

"What!" Ulysses turned pale. "Do you mean that these Cyclops are cannibals?"

"They are" Silenus nodded. "No stranger comes here, who is not eaten up."

This was bad news indeed; and the sailors, crowding round Silenus to hear his words, looked at one another in dismay. However, no giant was in sight, so far as they could see; and their captain's first thought was to enquire if they were in instant danger. "Where is your master now?" he asked nervously. "Not there in the cave, we hope?"

"No no, he is away on Mount Etna with his hounds, hunting" Silenus assured him.

For the time being, as it seemed, the unhappy sailors were safe. But it was clear that they must find at once the food that they needed, and return to their ship before it was too late. "Do you know what we want of you" Ulysses asked urgently "so that we may escape in safety?"

"I know not" Silenus said, with a shrug of his old shoulders. "But I and my sons will help you, if we can."

"Then give us food, my friend. For we are sorely in need of it."

Silenus seemed to hesitate. He was the slave of Polyphemus, to whom all the sheep and everything else in the cave belonged. And if he gave anything to Ulysses, he feared lest the giant should find out the theft. So he answered, doubtfully: "There is nothing here for you, as I have told you—except sheep."

"Sheep's flesh will cure our hunger, well enough" Ulysses broke in.

"We could find you some milk" Silenus offered. "And some cheeses, perhaps—"

"Bring them out, bring them out!" the Greek captain cried hastily. "Let us see everything you have, before we begin to bargain."

"But how much gold will you give in exchange for them?" the Satyr demanded. He was quite willing to help Ulysses, and to steal from his master such supply of milk and cheese, as was not likely to be missed; but like Ulysses, he was a Greek; and the old Greeks were all keen bargainers, who gave nothing without payment, even to their friends.

Ulysses looked troubled. "We have no gold to spare" he was forced to admit; their long voyage had exhausted nearly all the wealth, which the ship's crew had brought with them from Troy as their share of the plunder. But soon, remembering how Silenus had said there was no drink but milk in the island, Ulysses thought of something better than gold. "But we have Dionysus' own drink, the juice of the grape" he promised.

Silenus gave a cry of joy. "Wine? Wine, did you say? Alas, it is long since these dry old lips knew the taste of it!"

"I have the wine which was once given me by Maron, Dionysus' own son" went on Ulysses, tempting him.

"By Maron! I nursed him as a baby in my arms!" old Silenus cried. "But where is it? Where is it? Down there aboard your ship?" The old fellow could hardly contain his impatience, as he thought of the wine of which he had been deprived for so long. "Oh, where?"

Ulysses beckoned two of his men, who bore a skin bottle between them. "Here it is, old man—in this skin which you see!"

Silenus rushed forward and began fondling the skin, smacking his lips greedily. His sons were hardly less excited, skipping and leaping round the sailors with loud cries of delight. Ulysses saw that he had chosen well, in offering them this bait. But they had still to do their bargaining; and old Silenus was too truly a Greek, to accept any reward without first trying to cheapen it. "Why!" he exclaimed, as though he were disappointed. "The wine that this skin holds would be no more than a mouthful, for me!"

"But there is plenty more, besides what you see in that" was Ulysses' prompt reply.

The old Satyr sighed with joy, and rolled up his eyes. "You promise me a fountain, dear to my heart!" he murmured. He was already busy with the seal of the skin, and looked round for a drinking-cup.

"Would you drink it unmixed?" Ulysses asked in surprise. For the Greek wine was not a liquid, ready to be drunk, like ours; it was preserved in

thicker form, like a fine jelly, and the Greeks used to mix it with water, according to their taste.

"You will not refuse me that, surely" replied old Silenus cunningly. "For to taste makes the purchaser more eager to buy!"

Ulysses laughed. "Taste, then! Here is the cup, and the skin with it!"

"Pour it out" Silenus cried. "I have all but forgotten the taste of wine. Waken my old memories! Ah—!"

Ulysses tilted the skin. "See!" he exclaimed, as the thick wine trickled out.

"Oh, joy! How sweetly it smells!"

"You see it, then?" asked Ulysses, laughing again; for the old fellow was sitting back, with his nostrils dilated and his eyes closed, as though in a beautiful dream.

"Not yet, by Zeus! But I can smell it, I can smell it!" the Satyr murmured, entranced.

Ulysses held the cup to his lips. "Taste, then! That you may praise it not only in words!"

And old Silenus, throwing back his head, drew in so huge a draught that they thought he would never finish. At last he leaped to his feet. "Ha ha!" he roared. "Great Dionysus summons me to the dance! Joy, joy!" And he began to hurl himself about, shouting and singing.

"Did it run sweetly down your throat?" Ulysses kept asking him. And the old man shouted merrily:

"I feel the warmth of it in my very nails!"

Ulysses, having now won Silenus' friendship, hastened to push his advantage further still. "I will give gold as well" he promised, "for I think we have

still a little left in the ship—" But Silenus cared nothing for that, so long as the wine was abundant.

"Let the gold be!" he cried, still dancing and leaping clumsily. "Only pour out more wine, more wine!"

"Then you must bring us out some cheeses, or a young goat" the sailor reminded him.

"I will, I will! What care I for any master!" He held out his empty cup. "Fill this once more, and I will give you all the flocks that the giants feed on their hills! Aye, and I would dare more than that—" he went on, exultant, as the skin-bearers carried forward their precious burden again, in answer to Ulysses' signal. "If I were drunk enough, I'd dare to leap head-first from the rocks of Leucade, and dive into the sea! He is a fool, who does not feel his courage rise when he drains the flowing bowl! Wine fires men's hearts, and brings them new joys. With eager hands they clasp their women in the dance, and forget all the sorrows that assailed them before. So do I kiss thy lovely gift, Ulysses! As for the Cyclops—let the brute weep tears with that single eye of his, which glares from his ugly brow—!" By this time the Satyr's cup had been refilled. And taking it, he went off still singing and rejoicing into the cave, to fetch what the sailors wanted.

His sons remained outside. They had not ventured to interrupt their father before; but now that Silenus was gone, they pressed forward chattering, to greet the old traveller of whom they had so often heard. "Wait here with us" they clamoured. "Talk to us, Ulysses! There is much that we want to hear—"

"We may talk like old friends together" Ulysses agreed.

The Satyrs wished to hear, from Ulysses' own lips, details of that great Trojan War of which so many rumours had reached them. And chiefly they longed to know what happened to Helen, for whose sake the war had been fought. Helen was wife of Menelaus, king of Sparta; but when a Trojan prince called Paris came visiting Sparta, Helen had fallen madly in love with him, and had run away to Troy with him, leaving Menelaus in the lurch. The Satyrs were curious to know if Menelaus had recovered his wife; and if so, whether he had punished her.

"Were you there when Troy fell?" they asked. "Did the Greeks take Helen captive?"

"Indeed we did" Ulysses assured them. "And we laid waste the stronghold of King Priam, whose son Paris was."

But the Satyrs cared little what had happened to Priam. They began asking about Helen again: "When you had seized that loveliest of women" they enquired "did you all wed her, one after another? For we have heard that Helen loves to change from husband to husband!" they laughed. "She was false to her marriage-vows at the first, when she beheld the painted armour of Paris, and his golden chain, and fell in love with him, and fled from good Menelaus. Ah, would there were no women at all in the world, save those whom *we* might win!"

Ulysses, who was goodnatured and talkative, was ready enough to tell them stories about Troy; but before he could answer, there came a sudden bleat of sheep from the cave, and the sound of Silenus' voice:

"Catch them, catch them!" the old man was shouting.

The sailors turned, and saw the old Satyr returning. He was bowed under the heavy weight of two great wicker baskets, full of cheese; and before him ran half a dozen young lambs. The sailors at once secured these, slaughtered them, and bound them in pairs ready to be carried away to the ship; while Silenus set down his big baskets of cheese before Ulysses.

"See, I bring lambs and kids" he cried, "and as many cheeses as you like to take away. They are yours. Make haste to escape, my friends, before it is too late. But first give me my payment—" he smacked his lips "—the grape-juice of Dionysus, that makes men rejoice!"

Ulysses had more wine ready, and signed to his men to bring it forward. Their exchange was just complete, when a sharp cry of terror from one of the Satyrs interrupted them.

"The Cyclops! The Cyclops is coming!" he exclaimed.

CHAPTER III

It was too true.

Some distance off, but rapidly approaching, they could discern the huge form of the giant striding down from the hills. He had not seen them yet, as they lurked in a little sheltered spot among tumbled rocks; but he was making straight for the cave. They looked at one another in blank despair.

"Alas, what shall we do now?" Ulysses cried, catching the old man by the arm. "Whither shall we escape?" For if they broke from the rocks which sheltered them, they would be in full view of the approaching giant, and would be caught by him before they could launch their ship.

"Quick! Into the cave with you!" Silenus replied. "There is nowhere else for you to hide."

But this seemed like madness. "Shall we run straight into his trap?" demanded Ulysses, aghast.

"The cave is full of nooks and cracks" Silenus told him. "You will find hiding-places there. Make haste!"

"Not I!" returned Ulysses stoutly. He had already recovered from his first alarm. After all, thought he, his crew had done nothing wrong in coming to ask for food. By the old laws of Greece, they were entitled to ask help in their sore need, and the giant was bound to listen to them. If they hid in the cave, and he discovered them, they would seem to have put themselves in the wrong, and to have behaved like robbers. So he stood firm, with his men grouped close behind him, in a corner of the rocks. "Not I! We should indeed disgrace the story of Troy, if we fled from one man! How many times have we withstood ten thousand Trojans, spear and shield in our hands! If we must die, let us die like soldiers and men; and if we live, we shall maintain the honour which we have won already."

His comrades agreed with this. But they were very much astonished at the next act of Silenus; for the old fellow had picked up a piece of rock, with

which he dealt himself two or three sharp blows on the top of his bald head. The sailors thought he had gone mad with alarm; they had not realised, yet, what a coward he was, and how little his friendship could be trusted. Meanwhile, Silenus began yelling and groaning:

"Help, help! My sons, help me! Quickly!"

Next moment, the giant leaped down from a rock, and stood huge before them. He was facing Silenus and the cave, and had his back to the sailors; but even so, he looked terrible enough. His legs were like oak-trees; his body was bigger than an elephant's; and his voice sounded like thunder. He was too busy staring down at old Silenus, to notice the group behind.

"What's this, what's this?" he roared. "This is not Dionysus' court, for you to be dancing and shouting in it! How are my young lambs in the cave? Milking their mothers, are they? Or playing at their sides? Are the fresh cheeses made? Have you pressed them into the plaited baskets? Speak, will you!" He advanced towards the Satyrs, threatening them. "Or I'll beat you, until the tears rain from you! Look up, when I speak!" For the Satyrs, terrified, stood trembling and speechless, staring down at the ground.

Silenus raised his head, his face showing pale with fear. "See, I gape up at Zeus himself!" he gasped. "I stare at Orion and the stars—"

"Is dinner cooked and laid for me, as it ought to be?" the Cyclops demanded.

"Yes, yes! All ready, if your throat is ready, sir!" stammered the old man.

"And the bowls full of milk?"

"Yes, sir, they are brimming over." Silenus assured him eagerly. "You may drink off a whole tubful, if you are thirsty enough—"

"Cow's milk, or ewe's?" was the next question that the giant asked. His food was very simple, because he and his brothers were not clever enough to know how to vary it. But such as it was, it had to be carefully prepared, or the giant was angry. "Cow's, or ewe's?" he roared out again, before Silenus could reply.

"Both—either—!" squealed the terrifed little man. "Only, please don't swallow *me*!"

Polyphemus laughed harshly; and the sound was like thunder rumbling in the hills. "Not likely!" he growled. "For if you started your mad dancing in my belly, you would kick me to death!" Just then, the giant heard a sound behind him, and turned round to find himself face to face with the trembling Greeks. A groan burst from their lips, at the first sight of his face. The back view of him had been awful enough, but his front view was a nightmare. His beard was huge, and filthy, and unkempt, like the roots of a tree; his features were red and furious; and he had only a single eye—not underneath his brow, as they might have expected, but in the middle of his forehead above his great hooked nose. They shrank back, as that dreadful eye glared down at them.

"What crowd is this, so near to my sheep-stalls?" he bellowed. Then, his glance roving round, he saw the slain lambs lying in the shade of a rock, bound together in pairs as the sailors had placed them. His face grew purple with rage. "Thieves!

Outlaws! So my lambs are ready to be stolen away? And cheeses, too?" He wheeled round again, towards Silenus. "Who gave you those hard knocks on your bald head, old man?" he enquired, wrathfully.

"Alas, alas!" wailed the Satyr dolefully. "I have been beaten for your sake, sir! I am very ill!"

And too late, the Greeks perceived what a trick the faithless old man meant to play on them. He would have helped them to regain their ship, if he could; but since there was no time for that, he had made up his mind to put all the blame on them, rather than to suffer himself.

"By whom?" Polyphemus roared, glancing at the Greeks. "Who has dared to lay hands on you?"

"Alas, sir" Silenus whined, "those strangers beat me most cruelly, because I would not let them run away with your goods!"

The giant snorted angrily, with a noise like three elephants trumpeting at once. "Did not the scoundrels know I am a god?" he demanded. "And the son of a god?" For the Cyclops were sons of Neptune, the fierce god of the sea.

"Indeed sir, I kept telling them so" the old Satyr lied. "They would not listen to me, they did not care who you were. I was alone outside the cave, when they broke in by force—my sons had not yet returned—and began to drag out your property. In spite of all that I could say, they fell on your fresh cheeses—your own supper, sir!—and started to gobble them up. Then they drove out those lambs, and slaughtered them before my eyes."

"Did they!" said the giant, very grimly. "Go on! What else did they do?"

"Oh sir, far worse than that! I dare hardly tell you."

"Out with it!" Polyphemus roared.

"They said—" went on the old man, keeping close by the giant and as far as possible from the Greeks—"they said, sir, that they intended to pin you down—"

"To pin *me* down?" shouted the Cyclops.

"To pin you down, sir, with a collar five feet long: to fasten you to the ground. And then—oh sir, I am terrified even to repeat what they said!"

"Speak out!" Polyphemus threatened him.

"They said that they would pull out your inside, through your single eye-hole! They would torture your back with lashes! Then they would bind you, so they swore, and lower you into the hold of their ship, to serve them for ballast. Till at last they would sell you as a slave, to someone who would make you carry huge rocks, or toil at the mill."

"Is that so?" the Cyclops answered, more grimly still, while the Greeks quaked with fear. "Well, perhaps they have made a mistake. But we shall see! Go—!" he roared at Silenus suddenly, in a voice which shook the rocks. "Make haste to set in order all my cooking-knives—" the Greeks' faces went whiter still at these dreadful words—"and heap up a mighty pile of faggots on the hearth, and put fire to it. They shall be slaughtered, instantly! And I shall eat my bellyful of these impudent strangers—some roasted, whom I shall cut up with my carving-knife as they come hot from the coals: some well-boiled and sodden in the pot. I am tired of the deer

that I hunt on the hills. Lions, too—I have banqueted on lions long enough. But it is many a day since I last tasted men's flesh!" And he licked his lips hungrily.

Silenus, traitor as he was, made haste to agree with him. "Why, yes sir! Something new will be very pleasant, since you have lived so long on one kind of fare. And indeed, strangers have been all to few at your feasts, of late!"

The old man turned towards the cave. And then Ulysses, finding his voice at last, stepped forward and hailed the Cyclops, desperately:

"O Cyclops, hear us in our turn! We landed here, hungry, and faint for food. We came up from our ship, to approach your cave. Here we found this old man, who sold these lambs to us. We gave him wine for them, in a fair exchange, which he took and drank. But this was all done without force, by mutual consent. There is no word of truth in the story he has told you. If you blame anyone, blame him; for he was selling us your goods, as it seems, without your knowledge!"

"I?" Silenus stammered, turning back to them on his way to the cave. "May you perish, you old scoundrel, if—"

"If I am not telling the truth!" Ulysses interrupted hotly.

Silenus began to protest, in a high shrill voice. "Cyclops, I swear by Neptune your great father—by mighty Triton and old Nereus, god of the sea—by Calypso and all the green nymphs of the ocean—by its sacred waves, and by all the tribe of fishes—!"

For Polyphemus was of the sea-gods' race, and the old Satyr strengthened his false oath by naming all the sea-folk he could remember: "I swear by all these witnesses, my dear, sweet master, my little lovely Cyclops, that I never sold a thing of yours to these shameless strangers!" It would have made the sailors laugh to hear the absurd names which the old man called the giant, had they not been too terrified to enjoy the joke. "If I speak falsely, may I lose those whom I most love! May my children perish!"

But the young Satyrs were not at all pleased to be included in this terrible oath. They feared lest the gods, perhaps, should take their father at his word. And they cried out, indignant: "Stop, stop! We saw you selling them the Cyclops' goods, with our own eyes!" And then they paid their father back with another oath: "If *we* are lying, then may our father perish! But do not break the laws of gods and men, by wronging the helpless strangers."

"You lie!" the giant replied. "I trust this old man more than you. I trust him more than even Rhadamanthus, who judges the dead!" And then he turned to the Greeks; for he was not so hungry, that he could not let dinner wait till he had satisfied his wish to know who they were. "Tell me, whence do you come, you sailors?" he roared at them. "Who are you? And in what city were you brought up?"

"We are from the Isle of Ithaca" answered Ulysses for his men. "We have laid siege to Troy town and destroyed it, we and the other Greeks; but now the storms have driven us down the sea, to your land, Polyphemus."

The giant became interested; for, barbarous though he was, even he had heard rumours of the Trojan War. But he thought little of the men who had fought it. Not being a Greek, he had no sympathy with the wronged Menelaus; and he considered that to fight ten years to regain someone else's wife was a waste of time.

So, if Ulysses had hoped to win the giant's respect by saying he had fought at Troy, he was not successful. "What!" cried the Cyclops scornfully. "Are you some of those poor fools who went to Scamander River, to bring back from Troy a woman not worth your pains?"

"We are" Ulysses replied. He felt unequal to defending himself from the giant's scorn; for indeed, by the time that those ten years were over, a good many of the Greeks had begun to doubt if the recapture of Helen were worth while. "And a hard time we had!" he added feelingly.

"That served you right" Polyphemus told him. "Did you not sail from Greece to Asia for that woman's sake alone?"

"It was the gods' doing" answered Ulysses, with a shrug of his shoulders. "We mortals have little power to control our affairs!" He was content enough to keep the giant talking, since that at least postponed the time when he should turn to his meal; but he thought that the moment had now come, when he should make a strong appeal to the Cyclops to spare them, in the name of the gods. He began, earnestly: "Great son of the ocean-king, we implore you as man to man to spare us strangers who visit you, and not to make so impious a meal as you had

intended! For in the heart of Greece we have built many temples to your mighty father, in which he is pleased to dwell. The bay of Taenarus is sacred to him; so are the caves on Cape Malea, and the Sunium Rock with its silver ore, which Athene holds; and the safe refuges which are kept holy in Geraestus. Greek arms have kept these for him, saving them from the Phrygians. You too have a share in them, moreover, since you live at the edge of Grecian land, beneath the fiery crags of Mount Etna. Will you not then let us approach, as men's laws decree? Receive us as shipwrecked men who are at your mercy! Let us have food and clothes and fire, and the gifts which are due to guests! You will not surely fix our limbs on your spits, like the limbs of beasts? You will not devour us, Polyphemus? Already the land of Troy has made widows enough in Greece. It has drunk up the blood of so many, now slain by the spear. It has given up to destruction the wives, children and old fathers of the dead. If you should roast us poor few who remain, to make yourself a feast, what will become of Greece? O, be persuaded, we beseech you! Let not your hunger prompt you to such a crime. Be just, and do no such wicked thing. For remember, sinners are often punished for their offence!"

But Silenus joined in, jeeringly. "My advice is, Polyphemus, that you leave not a piece of him! And if you eat his tongue as well, you will become a most cunning talker!"

The giant nodded. He had quite made up his mind to eat all the Greeks; and if he still continued to talk to them, it was because he knew they were

in his power, and he enjoyed playing with them as a cat plays with a mouse. So, smiling scornfully, he began to explain to them the laws by which he lived.

"Wealth, little man, is the god of the wise" he said. "All else is mere talk and boasting. What do I care about my father's temples, and the shrines where you say he is worshipped? As for Zeus and his thunderbolts—I laugh at them, stranger! I have not yet found that his strength is greater than mine. I will take no account of him. And I will tell you why—When he pours down his rain from the sky, I have a safe shelter in this rock, where I can roast a calf or else some wild beast, and drink up a pitcher of milk, and lie on my back, feasting. Or if the north wind blows from Thrace, and brings down the snow, I can still wrap myself warmly in the skins of wild beasts, and light my fire, and care not how much it snows. The earth brings forth grass by nature, whether it will or no, to fatten my sheep and oxen. To whom shall I sacrifice them, then? To what god, except to myself and my great belly, which is my chief god? A wise man's creed, as I well know, is just this—to eat and drink for the short time he is alive, and to care for naught. As for those fools, who make man's life difficult by inventing laws—let them go and weep! I will not cease to do just as I please—and to eat you up! As for the gifts which you demand of me—you shall have them: here they are! My fire, and my ancient cauldron, which shall soon bubble merrily as it cooks your tough flesh!" At that, he leaped forward, and began to drive the Greeks towards the cave. "In with you, in with you! You shall stand round the altars of *my* god, and provide me my supper!"

At these cruel words, Ulysses burst into a bitter lament. "Alas!" he cried. "Have I escaped the net of the Trojan war, and the perilous sea, only to fall at last into the hands of one savage ruffian? O lady Athene, goddess, daughter of Zeus, now grant me your aid! This is a harder fortune than the dangers of Troy. I stagger on the brink of death. And you, Zeus, who live above throned in the bright stars, look down upon this insult to your greatness, if you are god indeed!"

But his prayer seemed to be in vain. The giant rushed at the poor sailors, and drove them before him into the cave. And while the young Satyrs watched, all huddled against the rock, the wretched Greeks disappeared.

CHAPTER IV

The Satyrs were silent for awhile, awed by the appalling fate that had overtaken the strangers. Quite soon, however, they began to regain their high spirits. They knew that they themselves were in no danger of being eaten, since Polyphemus needed them to look after his flocks; and, like their father, they were selfish and cowardly, and cared very little what became of the Greeks. Indeed, they rather enjoyed the excitement of these events, and were soon joining in a sort of chant, in honour of the giant's supper.

"O Cyclops, open your jaws wide" they sang, "since there is boiled meat ready for you, and roast meat on the coals! Crush them, devour them, mince

them small! Cut up these strangers' limbs, and serve them on leathern dishes!"

Then they remembered that, had the Greeks survived, they might all have escaped together. And in their selfish way, they began wondering if, after all, they could succeed in leaving the giant's island on Ulysses' empty ship.

"Ah, let me but escape! Let the ship bear me safe away to some less dangerous shore! Let me bid farewell to this place, and to the sacrifice which the wicked Cyclops is making, as he exults in gobbling up the flesh of his guests! He is bold, he is cruel, that old scoundrel; for when men come to him and beg a welcome at his hearth, he cuts them up, and minces them, and digs his accursed teeth into their bodies, as they come hot from the coals!"

But the silly, selfish Satyrs could do nothing to save themselves, without the help of the Greeks. They could not sail the ship alone; so they kept up their foolish singing and dancing, round the mouth of the cave, waiting to see what would happen. For a long time, there was no sign of either the giant or his victims. But at last they could see some movement in the depths of the tunnel. Ulysses came stumbling out into the daylight, pale with horror; and he came out alone.

"What news, what news?" they yelled.

But at first he could hardly speak.

"O Zeus, what can I say?" he gasped, weak with fear. "I have seen dreadful things in there! Things that I dared not have believed—more like the wild tales that men tell, than men's actual deeds!"

"What things, Ulysses?" clamoured the Satyrs, frisking round him in mad excitement. "Has that old ruffian of a Cyclops been eating your dear comrades?"

"He chose two" Ulysses groaned, "the plumpest of my crew, and weighed them in his hands—"

"Ah, my poor friend! How did you endure such a sight?"

Then Ulysses, recovering a little, told them his awful story from the beginning. "We had no sooner entered the rocky cave, than he lit a great fire, casting the faggots of a giant oak down on to the hearth—there was wood enough to have filled three waggons! Then he spread out his bed—a litter of beech-leaves, on the ground near the warmth of the flames. He milked his heifers next, and poured the white milk into a monster drinking-cup, that held quite ten gallons. And he set by him another cup of ivy wood, four or five feet wide, and even more in depth. Then he pulled out a cauldron of bronze, and set it to boil on the fire—"

"Alas, alas!" they all wailed.

"He prepared spits, whose shafts he had trimmed with his axe, and whose points were hardened by burning. He set some vessels in a row, to catch the blood which he prepared to shed with that same cruel axe. And when this hateful, hellish cook had made everything ready, he seized my two comrades, as I said, and calmly slaughtered them—"

"Ah, the scoundrel—!"

"One he threw savagely against the angle of the bronze pot. The other he picked up by the heel, and

dashed his head against a sharp spike of rock, and knocked out his brains; and when he had hacked the flesh away with his cruel knife, he roasted it in the fire, putting the limbs meanwhile into his cauldron, to boil."

"And what did you do, Ulysses?" the Satyrs enquired.

"I had no choice! Wretched as I was, I had to approach him, weeping, and serve my friends' flesh for him to eat! The rest were cowering like frightened birds in the nooks of the rock, their faces white with dread. But at last, when his meal was done, the giant lay down heavy with the flesh of my comrades, drawing deep breaths. Then the gods sent a plan into my mind. I filled his cup with Maron's wine, and offered it him to drink; and I said: 'See, Cyclops, son of the Ocean god, how divine a draught the vines of the Greeks produce—the drink of Dionysus himself!' He took it, full of his impious feast, and emptied the huge cup without taking a breath. And then he waved his hand, and praised me, crying: 'Most welcome stranger, this is a splendid drink that you have given me, after a splendid meal!' So when I saw how pleased he was, I filled him a second cup; for I knew what the wine would do to him, who had never tasted wine before! I knew what penalty he must soon pay!"

"O, cunning one!" the delighted Satyrs exclaimed.

"Soon he began to sing" Ulysses went on. "But I kept pouring out cup after cup, as the wine warmed his heart. And he sang horribly, all harsh and out of tune, till the cave echoed with his roars and with the loud laments of my

comrades. Now I have slipped away, without his knowledge. I will yet save both you and myself, if you are ready to help. Say then, do you desire to escape from this accursed man, and to go back and dwell once more with Dionysus and the Nymphs?" Ulysses pointed towards the cave. "Your father, in there, approves of my plan; but he is weak, and cares for nothing, since he himself has drunk too deeply of the wine and is caught like a foolish bird in a snare. You are young, and more strong than he. Will you escape with me, and find your old friend Dionysus, who is so unlike this cruel brute?"

The Satyrs capered in wild joy, as their hopes of escape revived at Ulysses' words. "Dear friend!" they cried. "Ah, if we could but live to see the day of escape, and be rid of the loathsome Cyclops! It is long since he holds us against our will, and deprives us of the wine that we love!"

"Then hear the revenge which I have planned against him" Ulysses urged them, "and you shall be slaves no more."

"Speak, speak" they shouted. "Not even the music of the Asian lyre would be more welcome to me, than the news that the Cyclops was destroyed!"

And Ulysses went on: "Now that he has discovered the joy of wine, he means to go feasting with his brother giants, and share his pleasure with them—"

"And you will follow him" they interrupted. "You will creep up behind him with a rope, and strangle him, perhaps, or push him from the edge of some high cliff into the sea?"

"No, no! The plan I have in mind is more cunning than that" Ulysses assured them.

"What, then? We have all heard of your cleverness, Ulysses."

"I will persuade him not to join his brothers" Ulysses explained. "I will tell him it would be foolish to share this new drink with the rest; and that if he keeps the wine all to himself, his life will be the merrier. But when he falls asleep—as he must do presently, overcome by Dionysus' power—"

"Yes, yes?"

"There is a stake of olive-wood in the cave, whose point is sharp. This I have thrust into the fire, to make it red-hot. And soon, if we lift up the stake and plunge it into his single eye—"

"He will be blinded, blinded!" the Satyrs rejoiced.

"Such is my plan. For as a joiner works, building a ship—whirling his drill this way and that by its handle: so will I twist the blazing stake this way and that in his eye, and scorch out the eyeball."

"Joy, joy!" the Satyrs yelled. "Exult in your cunning trick, O clever Ulysses!"

"Then we will go aboard my ship" Ulysses ended, in triumph. "I and my comrades who survive, and you, and the old man. And in her hollow hull we will row swiftly away from this land."

The Satyrs were beside themselves with delight at this scheme: so much so, that for the moment they even forgot their cowardice, and were ready to help. "And may we lend a hand?" they cried. "May we too hold the stake that you plunge in his

eye? For we should like to take a share in destroying the Cyclops!"

"You must, indeed" Ulysses warned them. "For the brand which we have to lift together is a heavy one."

"We'll raise it, though—even if it is as heavy as a hundred waggon-loads—if only we can tear out the doomed giant's eye, like a wasps' nest!"

"Then be silent, all" Ulysses advised. "You understand my plot. And when I give the word, obey me as your leader. I might have saved myself alone" he reminded them, "for I have escaped from the cave. But my dear comrades are still there; it would be shameful to make off by myself, deserting the friends with whom I came sailing hither!"

The Satyrs were leaping round him, mad with joy. "Come, come! Who enters first?" they cried. "And who supports that leader, laying fast hold upon the stake, to drive it deep into the giant's eye and tear out the pupil?"

"Hush, hush!" others exclaimed. "The Cyclops is coming forth! Drunk, singing harshly, he comes staggering from the cave to meet his doom! Come, rejoice, and let us teach the fellow something he does not know! For soon we shall put out his light!"

And as the giant came reeling from the cave-mouth, they began singing a pleasant drinking-song, which should put him even more at his ease; for he must not have reason to suspect that they had been plotting against him.

"Blessed is he" they sang "who revels in the company of Dionysus: he whom a merry stream of wine has made ready for joy! Who takes his loved

one in his arms, and caresses her auburn hair, and sings serenades to her!"

Polyphemus came lurching towards them. "Ho ho, I am full of wine!" he roared in his tipsy voice, which was like the howling of a wounded beast. "Merry am I, fresh from the fine feast that the strangers have brought me! I am crammed like a merchant-ship to the very top deck of my belly!" He had already told Ulysses that his belly was his god; and indeed he was always talking about it. "But the smooth grass invites me out, to caper and dance in the spring sunshine—" He began dancing a few clumsy steps, while the Satyrs skipped out of his way, laughing and shrieking. "But I must find my brother-Cyclops" he bellowed. "Bring here the wine-skin, stranger, and give it me in my hands!"

"How happy he looks, how happy he looks!" yelled the Satyrs. "Somebody loves us, Cyclops!" But they were chuckling to themselves all the while, and mumbling beneath their breath: "A brand that you will hate is waiting for you—waiting beyond there, in the cave, like a coy little nymph!" And then, aloud to him again: "A garland of many-coloured flowers will look well on your head!"

And now Ulysses stepped forward, bringing the skin. "Listen, Cyclops" he began. "For I know all about the wine which I have brought you to drink."

Polyphemus turned to him, eager to learn more of this new god Dionysus, whose drink was so much more sweet than any he had ever tasted before. "What sort of god is he supposed to be?" he asked.

"He is men's best friend" Ulysses answered. "For he makes them to rejoice."

"I belch him up with joy!" returned the giant, hiccoughing noisily.

"That is his nature" agreed Ulysses. "He is a kind god, he hurts no one who worships him."

Polyphemus was stroking the skin. "And how does he like living in a skin?" he enquired.

"He is happy anywhere, wherever men choose to place him."

"But a god ought not to be prisoned in a skin!" argued the giant drunkenly.

"What does that matter, so long as you are pleased?" said the Greek. "Does his skin annoy you?"

"I hate the skin that holds him" Polyphemus swore. "But I love what I find inside it!"

"Why then, stay here, and drink deep, and take your pleasure" the cunning Ulysses advised.

"Shall I not go and find my brothers, and share this new drink with them?"

"By no means! For if you keep it to yourself, you will have the more honour." Whatever happened, Ulysses was determined not to let the giant escape him and join the rest.

"I should be doing more good, by bringing the god to my friends" the monster pointed out. But Ulysses again dissuaded him.

"To drink together in crowds, leads men to blows. They fight, and hurt one another," he warned him.

"No one is likely to hurt *me*!" the Cyclops boasted. "Drunk though I am!"

"Even so, dear friend, it is far wiser to remain in peace at home, when one has been drinking."

"Peace? Who wants peace? The man who drinks, and is content to remain at peace, is a fool!" For the giant was ready to quarrel with anyone now. Had he gone off to join his brothers, it was possible that they might come to blows, during which Ulysses and the rest could make their escape; but on the other hand, the giants might all return to the cave, upsetting Ulysses' plan and preventing his escape altogether. So the Greek warned him again:

"It is wiser to drink at home!"

The giant was now too drunk to know what to think; but he had still enough sense to remember that he ought not to be guided by a man, whose friends he had just eaten. So he decided to ask the advice of Silenus, whom alone he trusted; and he called on the little old man by name, in a great bellowing voice that brought him running from the cave.

"What do you say that I should do, Silenus?" he asked. "Stop here, or go in search of the rest?"

"Stop here" Ulysses prompted him still. "For what need is there to divide your pleasure with anyone, Cyclops?"

Indeed, the giant felt inclined to agree; for he was already growing sleepy after drinking so much. And the soft grass made a tempting couch. "Truly, this flowery meadow is as good as a feather-bed!" he admitted.

Meanwhile, Ulysses had made signs to Silenus behind the giant's back; and the old man, though he was far too selfish to care what happened to Ulysses, was ready to join in the plot; for he still wanted more wine for himself, which he would lose if Polyphemus

went off over the hills with the skin. So when the Cyclops asked for his advice, Silenus supported Ulysses. "Yes, and the sun is warm here, sir. It is pleasant to drink in the sun. Sit down by me, then, and stretch out your noble body on this ground!" But as the Cyclops did so, the old Satyr removed the cup from which he had been drinking, and put it where he could more easily reach it himself.

The giant, however, was not yet too drunk to detect such a trick. "Why have you put that cup behind me?" he roared at once.

"Why, sir, that no one but yourself may get hold of it!" Silenus assured him. But the other was not deceived.

"You old thief! You want to steal it yourself. Put it here, I tell you!" Then he turned to Ulysses. "Stranger, you have not yet told me what men call you" he said.

"My name is NOBODY" Ulysses lied to him, on the spur of the moment; perhaps he thought that Polyphemus might have heard of his cunning, as the Satyrs had, and was afraid of putting the drunk giant on his guard. Then, to change the subject, he asked Polyphemus a question in turn: "What favour will you grant me, Cyclops, in return for this wine, that I may have cause to praise your kindness?"

"I will eat you last of all your friends" the giant promised with a laugh.

Ulysses made a wry face; if this was a favour, he thought little of it! But he accepted it politely, so as to keep the giant in a good humour. "You do great honour to your guest, Polyphemus" he observed.

Suddenly, the giant missed his cup again; for when he turned to address Ulysses, Silenus had slyly filched it once more. "What's this, what's this?" he thundered. "Stealing again, you rogue?"

But Silenus had taken a mighty draught, and handed back the cup with a grin. "This little stranger" he said, pointing at it "kissed me, because I look so beautiful!"

"You shall pay dearly" the giant threatened him, "if you start kissing anything that has not kissed you!"

"But it did kiss me" Silenus assured him cheerfully. "It said it loved me for my beautiful face!"

"Fill it again" the giant grumbled at him. "And give it to me alone."

Silenus poured out more wine. "Let me see, let me see—how do you like it mixed?" he began; but he contrived the steal another sip before passing the cup to his master. Polyphemus roared out a great oath.

"Give it me, I say!"

"Not till you crown yourself with flowers; for that is what men should do when they sit down to their wine. But you'll allow me just one more taste, first?"

"You are a swindling cup-bearer!" the giant complained. But he was now too drunk to enforce his commands; and the little Satyr teased him, holding the cup just out of his reach.

"Beautiful, beautiful!" he sighed, helping himself to yet another drink. "Wipe your mouth, Polyphemus, before I let you have the wine again!"

The giant did so, grumbling helplessly all the while. "See now, my beard is clean" he groaned.

"Now hold your elbow so" Silenus directed. "And take a deep draught—like this!" And once again, the cup returned to the old fellow's lips.

"Stop, stop—!" yelled Polyphemus.

"Oh ye gods, what a lovely drink!" Silenus gasped.

The Cyclops turned back to Ulysses in despair. "Stranger! Take the wine yourself. I would rather make you my cup-bearer!"

"Gladly. I know how it should be poured out" Ulysses replied.

"Pour it then—"

"I am, I am! But you must be patient."

"It is not easy to be patient, when one is thirsty" the helpless giant complained.

But now Ulysses had secured both the cup and the skin. And he took care that the old Satyr should have no more chance to interrupt his plot. He filled the cup to the very brim, with pure wine in which he mixed no water at all, and handed it safely to Polyphemus.

"There, Cyclops! Take it, and drink it all. Leave not so much as a drop!" And to himself he added "Oh, if the drink would only kill him outright!"

But there was room for an immense amount of wine in that huge body, and Polyphemus drained the cup at one gulp.

"Phew!" he gasped. "There must be mighty power in those vine-trees of yours!"

Ulysses kept plying him with more and more. "If you drink deeply after a good meal" he explained,

"you will sleep all the better, and will not be troubled by thirst. But remember, Dionysus is a god who likes to be honoured; if you leave any in the skin, he will be angry, and will dry you up!"

The giant did not intend to leave any wine, however. As the guest filled his cup again and again, he emptied it as fast. At last, remembering the leafy bed which he had made for himself in the cave, he staggered to his feet. "Ho ho, I can scarcely stand!" he cried, reeling about. "What joy, what joy! The earth whirls round me, all confused with the sky! I can see Zeus' throne up there, and the gods sitting together!" But he was getting more and more sleepy all the time, and began to stumble towards the cave. On the way, he tripped over old Silenus who lay sprawling on the ground. "My little cup-bearer!" he exclaimed. "You shall come with me, cup-bearer—"

And before the old Satyr could roll out of the way, Polyphemus picked him up and tucked him under his arm, and bore him off towards the entrance, shrieking and waving his arms.

The young Satyrs roared with laughter as the two disappeared. But no sooner were they alone, than Ulysses silenced them. "Come, children of Dionysus!" he cried urgently. "The giant is safe inside. But we must act our part with speed, for he will soon sleep off the effects of his filthy debauch. I have already put the stake in the fire, where it grows red-hot. See, its smoke drifts forth from the cave Nothing now remains, but to burn out the brute's eye. Come, prove yourselves to be men!"

"You will find that our courage is as firm as a rock" answered the Satyrs boastfully. "But go in, before our father suffers any harm! All is prepared."

Ulysses turned to the cave. But before entering, he paused to make his prayer to Vulcan, the god of Fire, whose help he now needed. And he raised both hands towards the distant peak of Mount Etna, the volcano beneath which the Fire-god was supposed to dwell.

"O Vulcan, king of Etna!" he prayed aloud. "Help us to rid you of your wicked neighbour, and to burn out his eye with your fire!" He prayed also to the god of Sleep. "And you too, Sleep, the child of dark Night, lay hold with all your strength on this brute whom the gods hate. Let not Ulysses perish, and his sailors, after so many glorious deeds that they have wrought on the plains of Troy! Let them not fall as victims to a scoundrel, who cares nothing for either gods or men! If you, gods, fail us now, we shall be forced to think that Chance is stronger than you, and that you are no better than Chance's slaves!"

With these words the hero disappeared into the mouth of the gloomy cave. But the Satyrs, for all their boasting, made no effort to follow him. For they were as cowardly as ever; and they had no intention of running any risk, so long as someone else was willing to run it for them. Instead of helping, then, they began once again to leap and sing, in their silly fashion, chanting a hymn in honour of the triumph which another man had to win for them.

"Soon, soon, a grip like the grip of a crab will fasten on his throat, who devours poor strangers! Soon he will lose the lantern that shines in his head!

For already the huge stake lies hidden in the coals, the mighty branch which the fire is hardening! Help us, wine, help us! Let our good friend bring ruin on the giant! Let him tear out the Cyclops' eye, that the foul beast may pay the price of his shameless meal! Let him gain his revenge! And oh, let us once more find our dear master, Dionysus, that we may dance and revel with him whom we have lost for so long! Let us once more adorn ourselves with his ivy-garlands, and leave this hateful place for ever! Oh, make haste, make haste, Ulysses! Why do you delay so long? Will the time of our escape never come?"

But they were interrupted, angrily, by Ulysses himself, who appeared at the entrance of the cave, shaking his fist at them.

"Be quiet, you fools!" he ordered.

"Is he—?"

"Be quiet, I say! Keep your lips shut, and dare not even to breathe, or to wink, or to cough! I will not suffer it. Lest you arouse from sleep that evil beast, before the fire has robbed him of the sight of his eye!"

Ulysses had crept into the cave, and had espied the Cyclops fast asleep on the floor, face upwards. He had seen, too, that the sharp stake was red-hot and ready. But it was far too heavy for him to lift it alone, so he had come back to the Satyrs for the help they had promised him. Their cries and yells were loud enough to wake even Polyphemus, however; and Ulysses strode forward amongst them, cursing them and striking at them with his hands, till he gained silence.

"We obey, great Ulysses" they said. "We will make not a sound!"

"Come then, and lend your help. The stake is ready within. It is hot. Come, follow me!"

But still the Satyrs did not move. "Had you not better settle which of us is to come first?" they began. "Who is to lift the stake, and who is to twist it? For we all want to have a share in the great adventure."

Ulysses beckoned, angrily. They had promised him their aid, and he wanted them all. But now the cowardly Satyrs began to make excuses, and to waste time. "We are too far off" some of them protested, "as we stand here beside the door, to plunge the fire into his eye—"

"And we have suddenly gone lame" the nearer ones moaned, beginning to limp and rub their feet, though they had just now been dancing.

"Why, that is just what seems to have happened to us!" another group cried. "For as we waited here, we suddenly sprained our ankles—we cannot tell how!"

"What! You have sprained your ankles by standing still?" demanded Ulysses scornfully.

"My poor eyes are full of dust!" another of the Satyrs exclaimed. "Or is it ashes? How can this accident have happened, I wonder?"

Ulysses abused them savagely. "Fine allies you are!" he stormed. "You cowards, you worthless things!"

Then the Satyrs grew indignant. "Cowards, cowards? Do you charge us with cowardice, because we have some respect for our backs and ribs? Are

we to get ourselves well beaten? Do you want us to lose our teeth?"

"You promised to help!" he groaned.

"But we will help! We know a wondrous charm, which the singer Orpheus made. We will stand here and sing it for you, and it will make the brand rise up of its own accord, and enter the giant's skull, and scorch out his eye! You will see!" And that was all the answer that Ulysses could get from them.

"I knew you" he cried bitterly "in the old days! And now I know you better still. You have not changed! Stop here then, cowards! For I must do as best I can with the help of my own friends. But at least, if you will not help with your hands" he concluded, taunting them, "you can cheer us on. For we shall doubtless work more bravely, with such stout friends to encourage us!"

"Oh yes, we will do that for you!" the foolish Satyrs agreed. "Be sure you shall have our warmest sympathy, as we stand outside! Let him burn, let him burn, we wish you every success—!" And they began to dance and sing again, chanting their triumphal hymn. "Ho ho! Push on, most noble strangers! Make haste, burn out the eye of the giant that has feasted on you! Burn, O burn him up, the shepherd of Mount Etna! On, on—but take care, lest in his agony he does you some mischief!"

By this time, Ulysses had turned from them in despair, and vanished into the cave. The Satyrs went on singing and skipping about; but suddenly they ceased, as an appalling roar of pain and wrath came from the dark entrance.

"Oh, oh! Alas! My poor eye is burnt to ashes!"

It was the Cyclops' voice.

The Satyrs cheered and yelled. "That is a fine song, Polyphemus! Sing it again!"

"Alas, alas!"

The huge voice came nearer now, as the Cyclops ran stumbling down the tunnel, rolling his head in agony and feeling his way with his hands. The Satyrs skipped nimbly up the nearest rocks, out of danger, and hailed him as he appeared. "Why, what has happened, sir? Why do you cry out?"

"I am ruined, I am ruined!"

Something unlucky seems to have overtaken you, Polyphemus" they jeered.

"Oh, wretched man that I am—!"

"Did you fall right into your fire, when you were drunk?" the Satyrs enquired.

"NOBODY has ruined me!" the Cyclops roared, repeating the false name which Ulysses had given.

"Why then, you have taken no harm!" they at once assured him.

"NOBODY has blinded me—!"

"Why then, you are not blind!"

"I wish that you felt my pain!" the giant shrieked in his agony. "You would know then if you were blind or not!"

"But how could NOBODY make you blind?" the Satyrs pestered him, from their safe perch on the rocks.

"Oh, you are mocking at me! Where is NOBODY?"

"Nowhere, Cyclops!" they replied.

The giant paused outside the cave, blocking the narrow passage with his huge bulk, so that none of

the Greeks should slip past him and escape. Then he called up to the rocks:

"Know then, the stranger has done this—the wicked stranger, who gave me his wine, and so made me helpless—"

"Ah, yes!" they jeered at him from above. "Wine is a dreadful thing, sir, is it not? Very hard to fight against!"

"By the gods!" Polyphemus swore. "Have the strangers escaped? Or are they still in the cave?"

And now the Satyrs really did do something at last, to help the unfortunate Greeks. They saw that Polyphemus, blind though he was, could still blockade the tunnel which led out of the cave, and so prevent the Greeks from escaping. And for all their selfishness and cowardice, they knew that they themselves could never get away from the island unless the Greeks reached their ship. They had to find some means of distracting the giant's attention, while his captives slipped by. Meanwhile, they had not yet answered Polyphemus' question; and he soon guessed from their sudden silence that the Greeks were still inside. He knelt down at the tunnel-mouth, his huge hands outstretched, and waited.

But the Satyrs, whispering together, had devised a plan. They left off mocking Polyphemus, and instead called down to him, softly and urgently, like friends:

"You have missed them, Cyclops. Quick, or you will be too late!"

"Where, where? Which way are they escaping?" the giant cried eagerly.

"Over there they stand" called down the Satyrs in their soft, seeming-friendly tones. "They are all huddled together, keeping still and watching you, too frightened to move."

"To my right, or to my left?" asked Polyphemus.

"To your right—quickly!" they urged.

"Where?" The giant turned, crouching like a beast for its spring.

"Straight in front. You've cornered them!"

The Cyclops hurled himself forward. But there were no Greeks there, as he might have guessed if he had been less simple, or less distraught with his wound. Instead, he dashed his head against the rock with a frightful crash, and reeled back, dazed and bewildered. "Oh, oh! I've cracked my skull!" he yelled.

"Oh Cyclops, they are creeping away behind you!" the Satyrs warned him. And once again the blind giant sprang forward madly, only to knock his face once more against the hard rock.

"They are not here" he wailed.

"Not now. You have missed them. They are lurking on your left!"

But the giant understood at last, and gave up the attempt. "Alas, I am mocked" he groaned. "They make fun of my misery!" And stretching out his arms, he sent forth his huge voice in a last desperate cry: "Nobody! Accursed enemy, where are you?"

But by this time, Ulysses and his Greeks had seized their chance, and slipped safely from the mouth of the cave while the giant was blindly deluding himself. Softly they ran across the grass, and skirted the wall of rocks, and then went leaping headlong down the hill to the bay where their ship

lay waiting. The Satyrs followed them, even old Silenus limping along behind. With a great heave they thrust their ship from the shelving beach, and all scrambled aboard. And then at last, as the space widened between themselves and the shore, and the voice of the giant reached them shouting "NOBODY, NOBODY!", Ulysses stood up on the poop, and framed his mouth with his hands, and yelled back to him:

"I am here, safe, and far from you—even I, ULYSSES!"

"ULYSSES!" the giant answered, with a terrible cry.

"That is my name. And full well have I revenged myself for your cruel meal. For Troy had fallen in vain, if I had let you slay us here with impunity!"

The giant had reached the shore now, and his voice was bitter with despair. "Alas, alas, the ancient prophecy is fulfilled! For it foretold that I should be robbed of my sight by Ulysses, as he came home from Troy. Yet it foretold, too, that you should be punished for this, by being driven far over the sea!"

"Go, hang yourself!" mocked the Greek. "I am off on my homeward way!"

Vainly, the giant seized great pieces of rock and hurled them after that voice. The Greeks were already out of range; and as they bent to their oars, the last sound that reached Polyphemus' ears was the song of the Satyrs, rejoicing in their liberty:

"Away, away we sail, shipmates of great Ulysses! Farewell, old Cyclops! Henceforth we serve Dionysus, till the end of our lives!"

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